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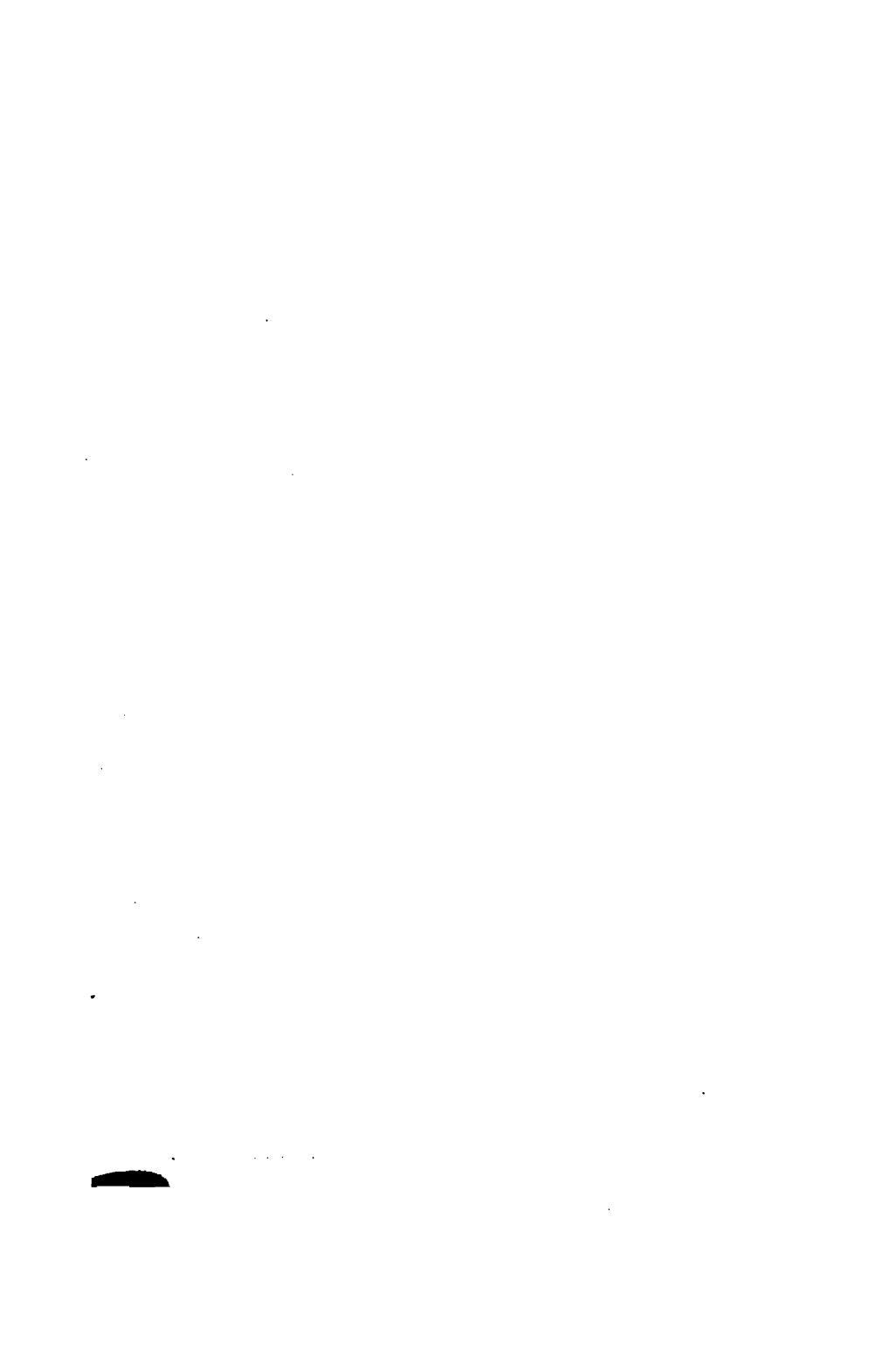
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THE HUSBAND'S SECRET





THE
HUSBAND'S SECRET

BY
RICHARD DOWLING

AUTHOR OF "UNDER ST. PAUL'S," "THE WEIRD SISTERS,"
"THE MYSTERY OF KILLARD," ETC.



In Three Volumes

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LOST IN THE DARK

VOL. I.

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LOST IN THE DARK.

Part I.

THE DARKNESS FALLS.

CHAPTER I.

"THE GHOST OF ALL MY HAPPINESS."

UPON the southern coast of Devon, a little west of Bolt Head, and in the face of the perpendicular cliff, the sea has worn a narrow passage no wider than a country lane. The cliffs, reaching the height of eighty feet, are bold and abrupt. Although a frigate could swim within fifty yards of these cliffs no large vessel ever approaches them very closely, for there are rough teeth of

rock rising partly out of the water here and there, and here and there wholly submerged.


The narrow passage winds between overhanging walls for a couple of hundred yards, then widens suddenly into a large landlocked pool called Green Cove. Green Cove is almost circular, very deep, and surrounded on all sides but the east by high rugged cliffs. On the east there stretches a strip of fine yellow sand in front of a grassy slope, and between the grassy slope and the pool stand a few hundred houses, the village of Greenlee. The Cove got its name from the colour of its water, which is always a deep, full, olive green, and the village owes its name to the Cove.

In the autumn of the year 1848 Greenlee was as little known to the outer world as the outer world is to the inhabitants of Central Africa. In the winter of 1848 it suddenly became famous as the scene of a singular occurrence which for a time baffled explanation and exasperated public curiosity.

Early in November, 1848, there occurred a most

important event in the village—one of its young men was married. He was not married in the village, for it contained no church ; but the lad was of the village, and the village took much note of the wedding, not only as it naturally would of any wedding, but because the two young people were popular and important.

The marriage was solemnised between Markham Spalding, of Greenlee, and Minnie Colville, of the seaside town of Rockfall, five miles distant. She was no more than twenty years of age, the daughter of a coastguard captain, of Rockfall, in whose district Greenlee lay, and she was very sweet-humoured and lovely. Her nature was even more lovely than her person ; a fine nature in a beautiful body always eclipses the body itself, as the beauty of a light always is more beautiful than the lamp, no matter how exquisite the lamp may be. She was loving and tender in her disposition. The love she had given her father was full of dutiful pride ; the love she gave her young husband overflowed with confidence and



joy. Her figure was gracefully turned, and of the medium height ; her hair was a warm brown, and her eyes soft blue, and full of delicious melting tenderness for those she loved ; full of sweetness and sympathy for suffering, full of simple piety when she lifted them to heaven.

Markham Spalding was the most important man in the village of Greenlee. He was six-and-twenty years of age, the boat-builder of the village. Although so young the fame of his yawls had crept round the coast and reached Rockfall, from which town many orders came to him. Upon his marriage with Captain Colville's daughter, William Spalding, his father, gave him five hundred pounds to enable him to employ more men and extend his business. Young Spalding was a loosely-made, curly-headed, florid young man, dexterous with his limbs, proud of his young wife and his skill, and afraid of no man.

Captain Colville lived in Rockfall, his means were narrow, and although he sometimes thought

he might have looked higher for his daughter, he was perfectly satisfied with her getting young Spalding as a husband. The lad was, he said, well made and would be shapely by-and-by, and was honest and hard-working and well-to-do, with prospects of bettering himself.

For a whole month after his marriage there was no happier man in all England than Markham Spalding. He had engaged additional workmen, received several good orders, and was all day, in the intervals of his labours, and even while bent over a log or plank of wood, or surveying the progress of his men, congratulating himself on the great good luck which had befallen him when Minnie became his wife. Every thought not devoted to his business was given to her, and when he left the shed in the evening and sought his home, he took his smiling young wife in his arms and thanked fortune that every day his love for her seemed to increase and their mutual confidence to ripen.

Early in December he was obliged to go to

Rockfall for the day. He told Minnie he should not be back until after nightfall. Then he kissed her, and with a smile bade her try and bear up under the cruelty of so long a separation.

To her the dinner that day was very lonely and the afternoon very long. As soon as it was dark she put a shawl over her head and crept out on the road to meet him.

She ascended from the village to the downs and tried to pierce the dark. There was no moon, but the stars were bright. When she gained the downs she stood and looked and listened in the direction from which he should come. She drew the shawl closer round her, left the road and walked a few hundred yards on the path used as a short cut by foot passengers between Greenlee and Rockfall.

Suddenly she started and uttered a scream of terror. The figure of a tall lank man had risen from the ground right in front of her. The man did not seem to take any notice of her. She was in great dread, turned and fled back to the road,

back to the village, into her own house. Here she sank panting on a chair.

The little fisherman's daughter who helped her about the house by day had gone home, and the young wife was all alone in the house. She lit two candles for company and cried a little for relief. "It must have been a ghost," she whispered. Just then the door opened, she screamed again. A man entered and looked at her a moment. "Did you scream a while ago on the downs?"

"Yes, I thought I saw a ghost."

"It was I. Sit down."

No kiss! No embrace! No gentle words for her! Nothing but that cold, half-scared look. He! Was it he who had lain on the downs after nightfall in December while she was waiting for him in loneliness! And now he stared and his eyes fell upon her without seeming to know that she was his wife, that she wanted his kisses, that she felt derelict for the embraces of his arms! There was something about him that forbade question. He had come across the downs in the

solitude and the darkness, and it seemed as though the solitude and the darkness still clung to him and wrapped him round in a robe of chill, forbidding exclusiveness.

That night he spoke only once again. Having sat a while looking vacantly into the fire, he pushed away the supper she had placed for him by his elbows and said: "I don't want any supper to-night. I have had my supper. I want to be alone. Go to bed."

"Mark ——" she began.


But he stopped her with: "I don't want any supper. I want to be by myself. Go to bed at once, I say. Do not sit up any longer. Leave the supper things as they are. I want to up a while and think. Go."

She felt choking. She could not trust herself to speak. She did not dare to look at him lest she should break down. Silently and softly she stole out of the room and into her own room. She closed the door, threw herself on the bed and burst into sobs. This was the first trouble

of her married life, and it fell upon her with cruel force. Had all their happiness gone away for ever? What had changed him? What had wrought this cruel change? Was it towards her only he was changed? Had she caused this miserable alteration? No. His words had been firm and decisive to her, but his tone was not harsh or unkind. The change had arisen from some other cause. What could it be? Was this state to continue? Was it to be always thus from this time forth? Kind Heaven, take away this blight and give her back her happiness!

At length she slept. When she woke it was still dark. She could not tell how long she had slept, but it must have been 'a long time, for she was stiff with cold.

She rose and crept softly to the door, opened it noiselessly and looked into the outer room. The fire and candle had both burned out. The light of the stars was brighter still, and she could make out most of the objects in the room. The supper things were undisturbed, and



he sat in front of the grate with his face towards the grate.

She knew he did not sleep, for he sighed twice and shook himself sharply, and coughed slightly.

She withdrew into her own room and closed the door again. This time she did not sob or weep. She was too much terrified. She did not know what to think. She lay thinking nothing at all. Her mind was a blank, save that she had the aching sense of undefined loss and the abiding presence of a formless fear.

The long night wore out at last, and footsteps began to move to and fro abroad. She got up and once more looked into the other room. The chair was vacant. He was not in the room. He had gone out.

She crossed the room and gazed with fearful eyes at the chair he had sat in all night, then at the untouched supper.

She covered her eyes with her hands and called his name softly, as though the syllables

were magical and could break the spell. Then she dropped her hands. The spell of desolation remained.

In her heart then she thought: "It was a ghost I saw last night on the downs, the ghost of all my happiness and all my peace." And she sank to her knees on the floor.

CHAPTER II.

A MESSENGER FROM ROCKFALL.

A FEW dark dismal days crawled tardily by, and although Markham Spalding went in and out of his house at the accustomed hours and addressed Minnie without any show of displeasure towards her, a vast and portentous shadow lay between them. He no longer spoke freely to her. At night he sat by the fire and looked into it with dull eyes, heedless of her presence, indifferent to all things around him. She sat at the opposite side of the fire, her sewing in her hands, the needle moving very slowly, the tears falling fast.


On the morning of Christmas Eve, 1848, a

ragged man named John Vaggers set out from Rockfall for Greenlee. He walked quickly the whole time, and reached the village early in the forenoon. Evidently he was a stranger to Greenlee, for he had to ask his way. He wanted the yard, not the house, of Markham Spalding. He was told by the first person he met to go down to the end of the main street and then turn to the right. When he came to the end of the main street he met a young girl with dark hair. He asked her for Spalding's yard.

"It is there," she answered, "that's the yard. Do you want to see himself? I help in his house."

"I must see himself," said the ragged man, walking towards the sheds.

As this man entered the yard the carpenters looked at him suspiciously. He might have honest business in the place, but he was unfortunate in his appearance. The people of Greenlee were as honest as the sun, but they



had a suspicion of strangers; and this man happened to be not only a stranger but a tramp also. There was a quick restlessness in the man's eyes which seemed to indicate that his reason was not quite sound.

"I want to see Spalding, the boat-builder," said Vaggers to one of the carpenters.

"What's your business?" demanded the carpenter addressed.

"That's my business, not yours," answered Vaggers sharply. "It's your business to tell me where's Spalding."

"In the shed over there," answered the carpenter, completely taken aback by the manner of the tramp.

Vaggers crossed the yard and entered the shed. No one was there but young Spalding.

"Are you Spalding, the boat-builder?" demanded Vaggers, in an aggressive tone.

"What's your business?"

"That's my business, you fool! Don't look at me as if I had murdered all your family.

There is only one of your family that deserve to die as far as I know, and that's yourself for being a fool; with your 'What's your business?' My business is my business. Are you Spalding?"

"I am."

"Very well then; that's my business with you. Take it."

The ragged man handed the boat-builder a letter, and leaned against one of the uprights of the shed while the latter read it.

The note was very brief, but as the young man took in its meaning his face darkened, and he became quite abstracted from everything around him.

The ragged man grew impatient, stood away from the post and said: "Is there anything about money in that? Anything about five——?"

"Did you read this?" demanded Spalding, with a sudden return to the position in which he had stood. He half sprang upon the man, then drew back and affected indifference as he

continued without giving Vaggers time for a reply. "There is about five shillings for you in this. It says I am to give you five shillings for bringing it. Who gave you the letter?"

"I don't know her name."

"A woman?"

"Yes."

"Did she wear a blue shawl and straw bonnet?"

"That's she," answered the tramp.

Markham Spalding rested his elbow on the gunwale of the boat on the stocks, and thought carefully for a moment. Then he tore up the letter in his hand slowly, and without seeming to heed his act.

"Give me five shillings, master, and let me go," said the messenger.

Spalding did not rouse up yet. He was reviewing the whole case, and thinking how he should treat this demand, with a view to diverting suspicion of there being anything unusual in this note. Five shillings was a suspiciously large

sum to give a man like Vaggers for carrying a note a few miles. "Five shillings!" he cried, after a few seconds. "Nonsense; a shilling will be plenty. Here's a shilling for you."

Although the tramp was little better than half-witted, he was sharp in some things. The woman with the blue shawl had told him he was to deliver the letter into the hand of Markham Spalding, and into the hand of no one else; that he was not even to tell what his business with Spalding was to anyone but to the boat-builder himself, and that he should get five shillings for his trouble and discretion. He concluded that this letter was not an ordinary letter, and that he was fairly entitled to the sum promised him. "I'll have my five shillings or I'll have none," said he in a petulant voice.

"Then you need not wait any longer," said Spalding quietly, as he moved away from the place where he had stood during the dialogue, and walked slowly into the yard.

After a short interval Vaggers followed the

other out, saying, in a threatening tone: "If you don't give me the five shillings I'll take the law of you."

"Get out of my place with or without the shilling I offered you, and get out quickly, or I'll make you!" cried Spalding, seizing a block of wood and threatening to throw it at the stranger.

Vaggers did not wait for any further inducement to leave. He darted quickly out of the yard and along the street.

Vaggers had eaten nothing all day. The previous night he had slept in the loft over a stable at Rockfall. In the morning he had risen and crept into the streets of the town. At about nine o'clock he met the woman with the blue shawl and straw bonnet on the slope of the downs between the town and Greenlee. She was on her way to the town to find a messenger. Her instructions had been to send the note by some one as little known as possible in the neighbourhood. The tramp had asked her for

alms. She was a thin, sharp-featured woman of the lower order. The woman had a shrewd, clever face, and a bright penetrating eye. She interrogated Vaggers, and found out that he was on his way from a Cornish village to Dartmouth. Thus he would pass close to or through Greenlee, and, as she calculated, go on eastward, leaving little trace behind him. After a little talk, and finding that the man was hungry and willing to do the errand, she had entrusted the note to him.

The tramp had not got the money she promised him, and now he was indignant with his treatment, and hungry. Like many half-witted beings, two of the strongest elements of his character were gratitude for services rendered and revengeful impatience of injury. Now he was hungry and angry. First let him satisfy his hunger, and then let him try if he could not find out some way of satisfying his feeling of revenge.

He knocked at a door and asked the young

woman who opened it for something to eat. He said: "I have walked miles to-day, and I'm going back miles to the place I came from. I was told I'd get money here for a job, and I have got no money. The man I came to cheated me." Then thinking with the cunning of his diseased brain that he might in some way injure his chance of food or of his prospect of revenge, he suddenly stopped up, and repeated his request for something to eat.

"Who was it cheated you?" the young woman asked as she motioned him into the sitting-room.

"It's no matter," he said. "It was about a letter, but I'll be even with him. I'll be even with him. Look!" he cried exultingly, and held out his open hand towards her.

She scarcely looked at what he showed her. Indeed she was for the time only dimly conscious of all that went on. Her eyes were heavy and she was full of grief.

He put back his hand into the bosom of his

tattered coat, ate what she set before him without sitting down, and then turned to go. As he did so he lifted his hat from his rugged brow, and said to the young woman:

"The man was bad to me and kept my five shillings, and I'll have my revenge of him. You were good to me; you gave me bread and cheese and beer, and I never shall forget you. Don't you be afraid."

She was weary and full of other thoughts, and glad when he was gone.

He hurried up the street and out of the village by the road leading to Rockfall.

As the young woman let the man out she saw a girl approaching, and held the door open for the girl.

"What was that man doing here, ma'am?" asked the girl, adding: "He said he did not want master's house, but the yard, and I told him where the yard was."

The young woman suddenly loses all her lethargy, seizes the fisherman's daughter by the

arm, and asks quickly: "What has he to do with the master? Had he a letter for him?"

"I don't know, ma'am, but I met him, and he said he wanted to see Spalding, the boat-builder, and I sent him to the yard."

The young woman hurries out into the street, and runs rapidly to Markham Spalding's building-yard. She finds her husband still in the yard among his men. She draws him aside into the shed where he and the tramp have spoken, and says: "Did a man come with a letter to you, and did you refuse to pay him?"

He looks at her in a half-suspicious, half-scared way, and demands huskily: "What do you want to know for? How do you know anything about this?"

"Because he called and told me someone had cheated him of his money. He swore vengeance against the man who had cheated him, and he showed me the torn-up pieces of a letter."

"Showed you WHAT, woman?" he shouts.

She is too much terrified by the shout and the expression of his face to find breath for an answer.

He grasps the gunwale of the boat and turns his dilated eyes upon the spot where he now remembers having let the fragments fall.

The fragments, from the largest to the least, have been removed.

He bends down over his wife and whispers with a choking voice into her ear: "If that letter gets into wrong hands we are ruined."


She cowers and does not speak.

With strides of haste impelled by dread he bursts out of his yard and dashes through the village, up the road, out upon the downs.

No one to be seen.

Bah! What a fool he was not to ask her what way!

He pauses a few moments, lost in profound thought. As he turns back to ask his wife if she knows what way the stranger took, he finds his wife close at his side. She has followed him



as quickly as she could, and come upon him while he paused.

"What way did he go?" demands the husband.

"To Rockfall," replies the trembling woman.


"Go home," he shouts; and without another look or word he sets off in pursuit.

CHAPTER III.

THE "VIGIL OF THE MOON."

WHEN Markham Spalding started across the downs towards Rockfall it was afternoon. The day was dull and heavy, but there was no rain. To his left the sea rose and fell in huge billows ; at his feet it bounded and churned among the rocks. There was little wind now, but the day before there had been a gale, and the surface of the sea still bore the memory of the wind in the hollows of its waves.

Spalding strode on at the top of his speed. The distance was only five miles, and the tramp had half-an-hour's start of him. The chance of his overtaking the tramp was almost as one to




infinity; still, the stakes in the game were as infinity to one; and so he walked with all his muscles in his strides. If he did not succeed in rescuing that torn letter from that man before it passed into other hands the fortunes of his life would be imperilled, and he could not even guess what more than his fortunes. To be sure there was this contingency—all might go well elsewhere, and if there were no discovery at Barnacle Cliff or out there—he glanced towards the sea—no danger would arise. But he distrusted the Cliff and the sea, and it behoved him to resort to almost any expedient, no matter how hopeless looking, to try and avert the catastrophe which hung above his head.

Great as was his haste, he found a moment to wipe his forehead now and then. When thus engaged he always stood with his face to the sullen sea. His blazing eyes explored the western horizon with an expression of expectancy and fear.

When he had reached within a mile of Rock-

fall, and could see the surface of the downs until it dipped to receive the little town, he abandoned all hope of overtaking Vaggers. The tramp should now be visible unless he had already gained the descent into the town, and as from the summit of the downs to the town was short of half-a-mile, Spalding could not expect to catch up the tramp before the latter reached the houses. Here he made a last pause, and for full five minutes kept his eyes fixed carefully on the sea to the west.

Four miles behind him lay his sheltered home, from which all the happiness had gone out ever since that evening in last month when he had come back from Rockfall late and heard his wife scream upon the downs. One mile and a half behind him stood the black rock known as the Barnacle Cliff, the spot of all others on earth now filling him with supreme uneasiness. A mile to his right hand was Rockfall, where dwelt two men in whose fate he was so desperately involved, and into that town had just stepped the tramp carrying



with him the link—the fatal link—which joined his fate with theirs, and placed him in such a cross-fire of danger as falls to the lot of few men in ten generations.

His eyes suddenly become fixed on a small section of the horizon. At first his glance is one of eager inquiry. He knows every spar and line in a vessel, and possesses what seems to inlanders the instinct of not only knowing one rig of a vessel from another at prodigious distances, but also of determining their nationality, their build, and whither they are bound.

There is a light breeze from the south-west, and right in the wind rises up gradually out of the sea a slender dark streak against the dull pale sky.

Keen as his sight and full as his knowledge are, he cannot yet satisfy himself about this craft. He throws himself on the ground, lies at his full length on his stomach, and shading his eyes with his hands, gazes upon that sail slowly growing larger in the south-west.

A fore-and-aft-rigged vessel of some kind, not a square-rigged vessel under only fore-and-aft sail, for the square sails would draw better now than the fore-and-aft sails, and there is no more wind than an all-plain-sail breeze. The wind is so dead aft that she doesn't know which side to carry her boom over.

She's got the foresail to port, and the mainsail over to starboard.

Ah! why does he starboard? Why does he haul over his foresail now that he sees the land? Now it will be possible to know what the vessel under fore-and-aft sails really is.

A dandy smack! a dandy smack that rises to this shore in the afternoon of Christmas Eve and hauls off when she sees the land. It can be none other than she, the *Vigil of the Moon*, the bearer of his fate, the argosy that may bring to him disaster.

As he looks at the vessel his whole frame writhes and twists. The veins in his forehead swell. His hands work nervously. His

reflections crush him flat. He does not desire to realise his darkest fears. He drives them from him with all the powers of his will.

On his left is his home and his workshops, and his young wife. Between him and them stands the black Barnacle Cliff, dark and forbidding like an evil portent in his fate. On that sea now sails a ship, the ship around which all his fortunes cling, and in that hidden town, in the hands of an exasperated man, is what may in twenty-four hours lead to the discovery of all, his own ruin, death perhaps, and Heaven alone can tell to what more.

He shudders and rises. There is no use in further delay. Now he is sure the *Vigil of the Moon* is in sight. She will be under the land in a few hours, and then——?

He does not pursue his thoughts further. He feels numbed by desperation. The one

great thing to be done is to obtain possession of the fragments of that letter. Of course the tramp may not be aware that the letter contains any damaging matter. That may be so ; but then why did the stranger gather up the fragments and show them to his wife, threatening vengeance, and indicating that the means of obtaining vengeance lay in those fragments ?

Goaded by this unanswered question he struck out for Rockfall, and in a quarter of an hour found himself in the streets of the town.

He sought first the little square of the town. It was most important that he should seem quite at his ease, and appear to have come from the village on his ordinary business. He turned into a ship-chandler's and said he had been obliged to come to town for some copper nails of which he had unexpectedly run short. He bought four pounds of nails, and had them made up in brown paper, and put the parcel under his arm.

Then he went into an oil and colour shop

and bought a gallon of varnish, saying what he had used lately had got a chill, and that he was obliged to take it all off again. The varnish he directed to be sent on by the next cart going to the village.

He thought: "It is Christmas Eve, and that alone would account for my coming without business to the town, but I cannot be too careful."

Then he commenced his search for the tramp.

He thought: "I will not go near the writer of that note or the woman. That would be the very worst thing I could do. For should anything happen, that fact would be sure to come up; and that fact, joined with the note, might be enough to hang me." He shuddered, ground his teeth, and went on.

He could not openly ask people if they had seen the tramp. If he did so that fact too might turn up afterwards and lead to dire results.

Going to his father-in-law was out of the question, for still more weighty reasons. And yet merely walking about Rockfall in the hope of meeting a man who might not be in the town at all seemed to yield but a very slender chance of success. What should he do ?

Just then, as though to tempt or thwart him, he came full upon Captain Colville, who greeted him somewhat coldly, and asked after Minnie's health. The captain was a full-faced round-bodied man of fifty, with a sea-reddened complexion and a manner which would have been hearty but that he had evidently heard of Spalding's strange behaviour towards his daughter of late, and was by no means pleased with the news. However, he made no allusion to the matter.

For a few moments ordinary subjects were spoken of. Then Captain Colville volunteered a statement. The captain's words were simply : "I intend going over to Greenlee to-night. When

you asked me six weeks ago to spend to-morrow with you I did not see my way to doing so, but now I do." The father had decided to go in the hope that his presence under the young people's roof on Christmas Day might help to dispel the unaccountable gloom which had lately fallen on them. "So," continued the captain, "I am just about to start now ; the walk will do me good. When are you going back ?"

"You are really going over to-night," cried the young man. "And you will stay over the night. It's very good of you, Colville." He grasped his hand and shook it vigorously.

The coastguardsman saw in this sudden joy and cordiality the desire of the young man to enter upon better relations with his young wife. He took his son-in-law by the shoulder and shook him softly and forgivingly, saying: "It will be all right if I go over. Won't it?"

"Yes, I think so. Anyway, it will be much better." This was outside the calculation, and might be well.

"Much better," cried the captain cordially. "Why, it must be all right again, you know, Christmas times. You'll give me a shake-down, won't you?"

"Of course."

"When will you be over?"

"Not for some hours."

"Well, good-bye, Mark. Mind, we must have no cross faces on Christmas Day." He waved his hand and was gone.

"The walk will do me good," the young man muttered, quoting the other. "It will most likely save your life. If you're there off duty. If they don't know you are there."

CHAPTER IV.

"POLICE!"

VAGGERS reached Rockfall a few minutes before Markham Spalding made his last halt upon the downs. The tramp had no very definite idea of the course he should pursue. He had a vague perception of the illegality he had committed in carrying off the fragments of the letter. He thought that, as he had not been paid for his labour in the matter, he had a claim upon the pieces; but he feared it might be otherwise, and made up his mind to run no risk in an appeal to any public office. He would not say anything to the police or to a magistrate about the thing yet.

What should he do? While he was walking from Greenlee to Rockfall it seemed to him that as soon as he had reached the town all would go on as he desired. Now he was in the town, and he found himself as far off from reaching the object of his walk as before he started. His only idea at present was to fall in with some one whose advice he could ask, and to whom he could show what he had picked up off the ground of the shed. Vaggers had but one notion of a place of accidental meeting with the better classes—a public-house. He possessed no money to spend in a public-house, and publicans did not care for the visits of people with empty pockets. What was he to do? He wanted twopence, only twopence. If he had twopence he should in all likelihood be able to secure his revenge, and perhaps recover the five shillings.

He did not know where the woman who had entrusted the note to him lived. If he had her address he would have called and seen what he

could do with her. She had told him the letter was of importance, and was to be kept secret. Spalding had been greatly alarmed when he (Spalding) asked if he (Vaggers) had read the note. There could be no doubt that the torn-up letter was worth something, and could be made the source of revenge upon Spalding. To make the boat-builder pay ten shillings for that letter would be a fine combination of profit and vengeance. But in order to do this it was necessary to lay the case privately before someone who could and would help him. The place to meet such a person was a public-house. It was too bad he hadn't a few pence.

All at once a thought flashed through his mind: If the letter was worth ten shillings, why shouldn't he have a lawyer? Often, when lounging about police-courts, he had seen lawyers take half-a-crown for defending some man the police had brought before the magistrates. If he gave half-a-crown out of the ten shillings he should still be half-a-crown better off than if Spalding

had paid him. That was the best plan after all.

By this time he was in one of the streets off the square. He was just passing a public-house; he turned in there to ask his way to a lawyer's.

Three or four men were drinking at the counter. Vaggers approached the counter, and said to the potman: "Will you tell me where there is a lawyer's? I want a lawyer for a little job."

Before the potman had time to answer, a low-sized man with a very red face, gap-toothed, stout and hoarse of voice, put down his pot, and turned quickly upon the tramp.

The potman, feeling that an opportunity of doing a good turn for a customer had arisen, said: "Mr. Retcard, there before you, is as good as any lawyer in the town."

The low-sized man and the tramp stood regarding one another silently for a few seconds. Mr. Retcard was not a lawyer but a lawyer's

clerk out of employment, and willing to make a few shillings any way he could without laying himself open to the law.

"Will you do the job for me, sir?" said the tramp, respectfully, to the little man.

"What is the nature of it?" demanded Retcard, looking at the other with a combination of knowingness and importance.

Vaggers glanced quickly round out of his unsteady eyes, and, bending low over the ex-clerk, whispered: "Could we go into any private place?"

This was the first time Retcard had tasted the luxury of being consulted on his individual merits, and he felt flattered, especially as he was out of work. He bent his head over the counter, and said a few words into the potman's ear.

"Certainly, you can have the bar-parlour, and welcome," said the potman.


Beckoning the tramp to follow him, the ex-lawyer's clerk led the way round the end of the counter into a little room at the back of the shop.

"Now, sir," said Retcard, when they were alone, "what can I do for you?" When Retcard was in situation he would have begun to a tramp with: "Now, my man. Now, my man." But Retcard was not in situation, and had too much respect for his own knowledge of the law not to be respectful to the first man who had sought aid of his knowledge.

"It's a matter of law," answered the tramp, somewhat evasively and very guardedly.

"You have unfortunately got into some difficulty," said the clerk, not in the tone of a question, but as one clearing away unpleasant preliminaries. Before he had drunk himself out of his situation he would have said to such a man as Vaggers, under similar circumstances: "Well, what did you sneak? Out with it at once and don't keep me waiting."


There was a faint trace of mild triumph in Vaggers's tone and manner as he answered: "No, I don't think I have got into any difficulty. But I think I've got someone else into a difficulty."



"Ah!" cried the little man throwing himself back in his chair and regarding his companion with admiration. "That is so much the better way. One of the soundest maxims of law is, Always get the other side into a difficulty. Pray go on, sir." A sense of pride in his client began to spring up in Retcard. Here was this miserable tramp, a man who seemed in intelligence far above his present position, who reposed confidence in him, only a clerk that could do no overt act in the case, and had so far placed himself in advance of most others who sought the law that he had already won the great move—that of placing himself in the right.

The tramp rested his elbows on the table and proceeded slowly :

"This morning I was on my way from Rockfall to Greenlee (I'm going farther east, but that doesn't matter) when I met a woman. She asked me if I'd carry a letter to one Markham Spalding, in Greenlee, and that if I did I should have five shillings for the job. I carried the letter, and



then he wouldn't give me the money, but nearly sprang upon me and was going to throw a boat-roller at me."

"You will have to fall back on the woman that sent you if he refuses to pay."

"But I can't. I don't know who she is or where she lives."

"Then," said Retcard solemnly, imitating as nearly as he could remember Mr. Baron Bandwoke when telling a jury that, though the heavens should fall, justice must prevail, "you are without remedy. It would be monstrous to suppose that the person to whom a letter is sent by hand is obliged to pay an exorbitant carriage or portorage for what may have been a perfectly valueless document to the recipient."


"But," cried Vaggers excitedly, "I am sure that the letter was worth the money, and that I ought to have got my money. She said I was to give the letter into no one's hand but his, and when he got it he turned all kinds of ways."

“All no use. There is nothing to go on. She gave you the letter telling you you'd be paid. You gave him the letter and he refused to pay you. You must fall back on her, I tell you.”

For a moment the tramp paused as in doubt. He questioned the prudence of acknowledging to this man his questionable act of taking the fragments of the letter. At length he made up his mind to trust his adviser. Thrusting his hand into his bosom he drew forth the fragments carefully, and putting them on the table before Retcard said :

“He read the letter and tore it up and threw down the pieces and then went out. I took up the pieces—here they are. Now can you make the pieces into a letter again?”


Retcard looked at the pieces in silence for a few seconds, then raised his eyes in admiration to the face of his client. “A most intelligent man for his position,” he thought. “A little mad, but most acute in his madness.”



Retcard gathered up the fragments on the table, and began trying to arrange them. The paper was written on but one side. This circumstance greatly facilitated the accomplishment of his task. He began by finding the margins of the paper. These were easily discovered by their smooth-cut edges. The paper of the envelope was thick and blue, whereas that of the note was thin and white. He drew on one side the thicker blue paper. He should have begun by sorting the different kinds of paper, but in his haste he had tried to dash at the centre of the secret. This unwise precipitation retarded his progress.

His next care was to draw aside every piece with writing on it, then survey the frame he had made of outside pieces and fit into the inner and jagged edges of the frame the pieces corresponding to the ragged indentations.

All this took time, and frequently after arranging a portion, as he thought, in exact conformity with the original position of the scraps, he was



obliged to undo all his work and begin over again.

The potman had looked in several times, but seeing Retcard deeply engaged, being a great friend of the clerk's and having no need of the parlour, he had withdrawn, giving the clerk an encouraging nod, as much as "Stick to your profession now that you have got a job of your own, and there is no knowing but you may be Lord Chancellor."

At three o'clock, Retcard having then almost completed his task, a man carrying a brown-paper parcel under his arm entered the door of the public-house and asked to be served with a pint of beer.

The parcel he carried was a heavy one; the man took it from under his arm and placed it on the counter. As the potman handed the man the pewter measure his elbow struck against the corner of the counter and a little of the liquor was spilled on the counter and on one corner of the paper parcel. The pot-

man apologised ; the man who had ordered the beer made nothing of the accident. The potman wiped the corner of the parcel with his apron.

At that moment Retcard finished his task of putting the pieces together, and said in a tone of triumph, and in a voice loud enough to reach the shop : "They're all together now, and I can read it. This is a most mysterious document."

"What is it about?" demanded the tramp in still louder tones.

At the sound of Vaggers' voice the man with the parcel started, flushed, grew pale, and finally walked quickly towards the bar-parlour. There was a glass door. He looked in and saw a pile of fragments of paper on one side of the table, in the centre of the table the fragments all lying in their original order, and, bending over them in the failing light, the figures of Retcard and Vaggers, the tramp.

In a moment he had turned the handle of the door and entered crying : "Police! This man has stolen my letter. Police!"

With one motion of his hand Retcard swept the fragments into his hand, saying quickly, as he realised who the new-comer was: "Mr. Spalding, your letter is quite safe in my keeping, and when the police come I shall be happy to hand it to them, if you wish them to see it."


CHAPTER V.

A COPPER NAIL.

FOR a little while the situation in the bar-parlour remained unchanged, and the three men kept silent. Spalding felt at a great disadvantage, and did not know how to act. He would have known how to treat with Vaggers alone. He would have tried, first bullying, and then bribery. Either would be sure to succeed. But this third man puzzled him. No doubt this third man had read the note, and was now in full possession of its purport. Who was this third man, and what was likely to be his position in connection with that unlucky document?

Retcard was perfectly self-possessed. He felt himself master of the situation, and that he would turn the situation to advantage. He had nothing particular to do in the matter just now, so he leant back in his chair and resolved to wait until Spalding should make a blunder. That was good practice. As it fell out the first blunder did not come from Spalding but from the tramp.

The appearance of Spalding on the scene startled Vaggers. He knew he was a tramp—that would be against him. He knew he had no right to take the letter—that in fact he had stolen it: another thing against him. He had had some intercourse with the police, and was decidedly averse from increasing his familiarity with them. On the other hand, he was anxious if possible to get some money for the errand, and he was inclined to get all he could. His desire for revenge had been completely dissipated by his fears of the boat-builder and the police. It is much more easy to cherish vengeance



against a man in his absence than in his presence, particularly when he is able to call for the police, and one's position with regard to the law is not secure, or satisfactory, or well known.

Vaggers was the first to speak. He turned to Retcard and said: "Give him back the bits if he'll give me ten shillings."

Vaggers and Spalding looked at Retcard. For a moment the clerk did not speak. He saw that Vaggers had made a blunder. If the fragments passed back to Spalding all would be over. Vaggers did not know the value of the document. The clerk had not read it aloud. It was very nice to have a client, but when the client had what seemed to be an excellent case and was bent on ruining it—well, bother the client then. He was only a clerk, and no lawyer after all. Suppose he in his own interest bought up the client's case, threw the law overboard and all its etiquette, and converted himself into a business man, with a view to making money.


When Retcard reached this point in his reasoning he said to Spalding: "Look at that window, it is the only window in the room, and it is barred. There are only two doors in this place, one from the end of the shop, and one from behind the counter; so that if you stepped out into the shop for a moment we could not leave this room without your seeing us. Now, will you step into the bar for a few seconds. I have something to say to my client, and in less than a minute I shall be able to treat with you?"

"Who are you? I don't know you. That man has my letter, and if he doesn't give it up peacefully I'll call the police and make him give it up."

Retcard kept his eyes fixed steadily on the boat-builder's face as the latter uttered these words. He had had much experience of men, and was quick to discover fear behind an affectation of indifference or boldness. In the present case he observed that although Spalding

wished it to appear he was willing to appeal to the police, he would much prefer getting back the letter by quiet means. The clerk's answer was uttered in the firm tone of a man who was not to be moved from his purpose. "I am a lawyer. This gentleman is my client, and is acting under my advice. I have in my possession the document you wish to recover. I know the purport of that document, and my client's legal, observe me, legal position in connection with that document. I wish to confer for a few moments with my client, and I ask you to retire while I do so. You can refuse to go if you please, and you can call the police if you please; it is for you to decide whether you will remain or whether you will call the police, or, last of all, whether you will leave us together for a few minutes, and then come back and hear what we may have to say."

The little man pushed back his chair, folded his arms, and crossed his short legs in token of inexorable determination.



Markham Spalding stood up straight awhile and thought. He had counted upon dealing with the tramp only, and now here was the tramp not only in communication with another, but absolutely acting under legal advice. He might have hoped to defy or bully Vaggers, but he did not feel equal to the task of contending with this other man. He would now gladly give ten times the sum demanded, almost any sum he could command, to have that letter once more in his possession. The case was one in which he could not seek the assistance of a lawyer. He could really lose little by withdrawing for a minute. They could not leave the parlour without his seeing them. He made up his mind to do what Retcard asked.

When the two were alone Retcard turned to the tramp and said: "It would have been a nice thing for you if he had called the police. Why, they could have given you five years for it. I think I managed it very cleverly. There is no doubt whatever that he has the

law on his side. You must summon him if you want your five shillings, and he could lock you up on the spot. My opinion of the whole case is changed. He does not seem the kind of man to stick at a trifle."

The tramp's face gradually grew longer under this dismal view of his possible position. The clerk proceeded :

"You don't want to be locked up, and you do want a few shillings. Now, so long as you carry that paper about with you, you are liable to be locked up."

Vaggers' face here assumed an expression of dismay. Retcard went on :

"Now, suppose I give you five shillings for the letter, and trust to my chance of being able to squeeze half-a-crown extra out of him for my trouble, will that be fair? I didn't steal the paper like you, and they can't put a finger on me. Here are five shillings for you, and you can go as free as air. I promise you that on my word as a lawyer."

There was a friendly impressiveness in Retcard's tone.

This was almost as good a solution of the difficulty as Vaggers had ever hoped for, and much better than he had expected since the clerk laid the case before him upon Spalding leaving the room. If he got his five shillings and was free to go, he should have gained his case, wanting the revenge, and the picture of police and imprisonment placed before him by the self-styled lawyer had deterred him from pursuing the feeling any further. He stretched out his hand and said: "Give me the five shillings and let me go."

Retcard placed the money in the tramp's hand, tapped the pocket which contained the pieces of the letter in token that the bargain was concluded, opened the door, and admitted Spalding.


Markham Spalding was looking pale and very anxious. Although it was cold, and he had long since descended from the downs after his quick

walk from Greenlee, he wiped his forehead with his hand as he came again into the bar-parlour. He had recovered possession of his brown-paper parcel of nails, and placed it on the table. He did not sit down. He stood with his back to the door. On his right sat the tramp, at the opposite side of the table was Retcard.

Meanwhile the beer which had been spilled on the corner of the parcel of copper nails had soaked through, and the dampness, aided by the weight, had burst the paper slightly. Through the little rift in the paper protruded the head of a copper tack.

Retcard spoke first. The tramp was no longer his client, and at the first sentence fell from his high position of gentleman to that of man.

"This man has made over the document to me, and you will now regard me as the principal. As a first condition I must ask you to let this man go. Here are the pieces." He pulled out a handful of fragments from his pocket, and held his hand open at a safe distance from Spalding.



"Do you consent to this man going? When he is gone we can talk business."

"He stole my letter and had no right to give it to anyone else but me, and if he doesn't I'll do my worst to him," said Spalding, with the doggedness of desperation.

"Very good," said Retcard, rising briskly; "I have the letter, and you can have him if you like. You don't seem disposed to talk business with me, so I'll leave you together."

"By heavens——" began Spalding.

"Stop! stop!" cried the clerk. "If there is to be any swearing it must be before a magistrate, and *to-night at ten o'clock.*"

As Retcard uttered the last few words Spalding sprang forward, looked furtively around as though he feared the very air might remember and repeat these words, and then whispered in a tone of entreaty: "Don't, don't. Let the man go and I will talk with you; I will take no steps whatever against him."

Vaggers, whose dread now was that any hitch

might arise to stop his going, stood up, and without a word slipped out of the room.

"Now," said Retcard, when the door was closed, "suppose we both sit down and have a little talk."

With limbs that tottered under him, the young man followed the suggestion of the other.

"We have never met before," went on the clerk. "But I know a little about you. I heard of your marriage, and I heard of one circumstance attending your marriage. I mean a circumstance connected with money——" He interrupted himself, seeing the alarmed face of Spalding and his uneasy look round. "Don't be afraid. I know that possibly we may be overheard. I shall not say anything which can be understood by a person who has not read this letter;" he tapped his pocket. "As I was saying, I heard a circumstance connected with your marriage. I can put two and two together, and although this letter is not signed, and indeed is far from plain in its meaning, I know who wrote it quite as well as you do."

Spalding was sitting opposite the speaker. His elbows rested on the table, and he pressed his two clenched hands against his throbbing temples. From his dry throat and through his parched lips came the words: "What will you give me back that letter for?"

"Do you mean how much money?"

"Yes."

"Well, let me see, let me see. Five hundred and five hundred is a thousand. A thousand is a thousand, when friends keep a secret, but a thousand ought to be five when—ah, well, the news is acquired at an outlay of money and as a speculation. But I am a fair business man, and not disposed to be hard on a customer. I'll take two fifty. Two hundred and fifty down before *ten o'clock to-night.*"

"But you don't know what the letter is about."

"Quite so. I really haven't the faintest knowledge. If I had no doubt I'd charge, say a thousand. Well, are you a buyer?"

"If I am here in an hour, I am. If not, no."

Spalding rose and mechanically took up his brown-paper parcel. He was like a man in a dream. As he lifted the parcel one of the copper tacks fell out.

Spalding hurried away.

Retcard saw the tack fall. He was literally amazed and hilarious over the prospect in view. He stooped down and lifted the tack, muttering :

"If a torn paper this man throws away is worth hundreds, the tack he lets fall by accident may bring thousands—in its own time."

CHAPTER VI.

FATHER AND SON.

WHEN Markham Spalding left the public-house and found himself in the street, he had but one idea in his bewildered head. He would at any risk try to render the information in that letter nugatory, by causing a postponement of the event to which it alluded. The difficulties to be encountered in effecting this were almost insuperable under most favourable circumstances, and in the circumstances as now standing there did not appear to be the shadow of a chance of his effecting his purpose.

“My father,” he thought, “my father ; at any cost or risk I must see my father.”

Then he strode quickly through the town, sought a small sequestered house standing alone up the slope of the eastern downs. He knocked at the door. An elderly servant woman opened the door and admitted him. He knew that his father usually sat in a small back-parlour, with his books and his pipe. Young Spalding did not say anything to the woman until he reached the back portion and found the room empty.

Standing in the doorway, he faced round, and stood fronting his father's old servant, Hannah Dunnow, the woman who had admitted him. As she stood in the hall her back was against a small rack upon which hung a variety of articles of clothing for outdoor wear. As his eyes fell over her shoulder upon this rack he shuddered slightly.

"When will my father be back?" he demanded, trying to assume a calm exterior.

"I don't know, Mr. Mark; he said he was going to Southampton, and that he would not be back for a few days."

"Did he leave no address?"

"No."

"Take care now. This is most important, Hannah. I want to see him on urgent business. Do you know where he is? If you do know where he is you must tell me." He put the question and urged for a truthful answer as impressively as he could without displaying too much anxiety.

"No, sir. I don't know more than I say. He said he was going to Southampton for a few days, and he did not tell me where he was to stay there, or when exactly he would be back."

Young Spalding stamped his foot with impatience and disappointment. Then turning to Hannah, he said: "You may go now, Hannah. I want to sit down and rest a bit. No; I won't have anything to eat or drink. I wish just to rest, that is all. If I want you again I'll let you know."

When the old servant was gone he threw

himself into an armchair, dropped his head back until it found support on the upholstered top of the chair, and fell into a profound reverie.

His position in this affair was most unsatisfactory and anomalous.

His relations with his father had always, as long as he could remember, been peculiar. He was an only child and had no memory of his mother. She died when he was little more than a baby. At that time, and for many years after, his father had been at sea as captain of a small vessel.

As soon as he, Markham, was old enough he was sent to a boarding-school, and kept there until he was sixteen years of age. Then his father, who about that time gave up the sea and settled down at home, apprenticed the lad to a boat-builder of Rockfall. The lad was clever and willing to learn. He lived with the family of his master. As soon as he was out of his time his father proposed to do for him, but with a proviso. The old man would start the young

man in business as a boat-builder on the condition that the young man would commence business at Greenlee. At that time Markham had already set his heart on Minnie Colville, the pretty daughter of Captain Colville of the coastguard station of Rockfall and Greenlee. Captain William Spalding cordially approved of his son's choice of a wife, and promised him that as soon as he was a few years older and had begun to get his business under way he would give him some more money to help him to marry on. Old Spalding was reputed to be very rich. Young Spalding, who would have consented to live anywhere if he might only have Minnie with him, readily agreed, and in due time the two were married, and Markham Spalding brought his wife home to his snug little house at Greenlee.

During all those years Markham had seen very little or nothing of his father. He had never lived under the same roof with the old man since the first day he had gone to school. His holidays were always spent at the school,

and when he came home to be apprenticed he immediately entered his new master's house, and from that house he changed into his own house in Greenlee.

In the neighbourhood his father had the name of being an oddity. He was now about sixty years of age, still straight as a whip, but stout, and no longer as quick on his legs as twenty years ago. He lived in that isolated house on the slope of the downs with no companion but the old housekeeper or servant or nurse, Hannah, ten years older than himself.

When he gave up the sea and came to live altogether ashore, he told a few townspeople with whom he had slight business relations that he had saved some money in his time, and had invested his fortune in foreign securities.

The year 1848 came, with its long list of disasters to speculators in foreign markets, and it was rumoured about Rockfall that William Spalding had lost the great bulk of his fortune. He told no one, not even his son, of this. Indeed,

to anyone to whom he mentioned his position he spoke more freely than to his son. Towards no one was he communicative; to his son he presented a most strict reticence.

Up to the autumn of 1848 he had been very punctual in his attendance at the parish church, and very liberal, for one of his position, to local charities. These two traits tended much to soften the disfavour he caused by exclusiveness and taciturnity. In the autumn of 1848 he ceased going to church, and declined to contribute anything to the poor's coal fund. He gave no explanation. He simply stayed away from church, and refused to contribute.

In the December of that year he met his son by appointment in town, and the two adjourned to the old man's house, where they sat closeted behind locked doors for hours. There was no chance of interruption from anyone but the old servant, and yet the father locked the door carefully, and spoke in a whisper.

Then and there the retired captain disclosed

to his only son the secret of his life ; the secret he had so carefully guarded from everyone else around him at Rockfall. And he had ample reason for doing so.

He explained to the young man how all his fortune but a few hundreds had been swept away by foreign collapses, and how, having given up the sea and his old connections, there was no chance of recovering the ground lost. Now he was old, and almost broken down. He had worked and struggled all his life, and done his duty by his son ; had thrown no obstacles in the way of his son's marriage with the girl he loved ; he had given him a considerable sum of money at the marriage in order that his son might develop his trade ; and now was it too much to ask one small favour in return ?

No. Markham would do all in his power to help his father.

That was right, the thing was very simple.

What was it ?

Well, although it was simple it was important,

and it would not do to risk failure. There was a Bible. Swear on the Book not to speak of this to anyone whomsoever, and swear to do what was about to be asked.

No. Markham would not swear to do the thing; he would swear not to speak of it.

Not swear to do a thing for a father—a father who had been so good to him! Who had, when he gave him the money to set up in business for himself—when he gave not only his consent to his marriage, but money to improve his business later on—always had such a contingency as the present one in his mind.

He would not swear to do what was needed.

Not swear! Did he know what was trembling in the balance?

No.

Well, here was he now old and past his work. After years of toil and risk, great risk, he had scraped together £4,000. These rascally foreigners had kicked up a row and all his money but a few hundreds had been swallowed up. But here,

here under their nose was a chance of not only getting more than had been lost—the stake he wanted his only son to help his winning was no less than £10,000! There! Was that worth taking an oath for?

Young Spalding was staggered by the idea that such a sum in any way depended on his action. He turned white and cold.

“Tell me all about it,” said the young man, “and then I’ll do my best to help you. I swear not to say anything about it to a soul.”

The father paused awhile in deep thought, then said: “You will pledge me your oath on the Book not to speak of this to a soul?”

“Not to speak of this to a soul,” repeated the young man, putting his hand on the Book.

“Not to your wife.”

“Why?” queried the young man. There was in the tone of his father’s voice as he put this condition something which made Markham pause.

The father continued: “I have my reason

for making this a special part of your oath. I have no faith in woman's secrecy."

"I could trust Minnie with anything."

"No doubt with anything but this. Rest on my word you could not, and you must not trust her with this. Now swear."

"But——"

His father broke in passionately: "Do you mean, sir, that you will not swear to keep a secret from your wife in order to secure a fortune for your father? For shame, sir."

Young Spalding touched the Book again: "I swear not to speak of this matter to my wife."

Then old Spalding made a tube of his hands, and whispered into the ears of his son. "You understand that?"

"Yes," answered the son, his face as white as death.

"Well, will you get him to do it?" demanded the father eagerly.

"There would be as much chance of his doing it as of my flying through that ceiling now."

"You will try?"

"I will not."


"What!" cried the old man in a rage of disappointment, "my own flesh and blood! You! You won't help your own father in his old age; he who helped you when you were a boy, when you were a man, and when you wanted to get married?"

"There is no chance whatever of his doing it."

The old man rose up in rage and said: "Very well. Mind, I leave the whole responsibility on your head. *If harm comes of it to others or to him, if blood comes of your not doing this, remember whose hands have shed it!*"

Here the stormy interview of weeks ago had ended between father and son, and the latter had gone towards home; but, sickening at the thought of meeting his wife with these fears in his heart, had lain down where she had seen him rise from on that sad night when the darkness fell upon her happiness.

Now, this Christmas Eve, things had taken



a fiercely bad turn. That letter had fallen into hands from which he had no means of redeeming it. He could not find his father. There was no means of ascertaining where he was. He should go across the cliffs and seek the Barnacle Cliff. If his father were not there nothing could be done. Matters should take their course. Ugh!

Here he opened the door and looked into the hall. From the rack he removed a woman's blue shawl and straw hat, brought them into the back-parlour, thrust them into the fire, and waited until they were thoroughly consumed. "That's one link broken," he thought, as he kicked the ashes with his toe, and left the house with the parcel of nails under his arm.


Then having gained the slope of the downs he started for the black Barnacle Cliff.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BELL OF BARNACLE CAVE.

WHEN Markham Spalding reached the downs after leaving his father's house, night had descended. It was then low water. The wind had fallen to a gentle breeze, and, judging by the sounds among the rocks beneath, the sea had become calmer. Still there was a heavy roll and a loud boom at the bases of the cliffs. Over the English Channel brooded a moist darkness, through which it was extremely difficult to see half-a-mile. A man-of-war under full sail a mile off the land would have been invisible.

Spalding strained his eyes seaward, but could make out nothing. "It's dark enough," he



thought. "If it keeps on like this, all may go well. The *Vigil of the Moon* must now be creeping inshore. It is low water now; at ten it will be close upon high water, and then——"


He did not finish the sentence, but shook himself roughly, and struck out swiftly for the Barnacle Cliff.

He turned up the collar of his pilot-coat and drew his hat down over his eyes. The chances of meeting anyone were remote; still it was best to be prepared for contingencies.

The Barnacle Cliff was a bold bare headland standing at the entrance of a narrow rocky bay, no deeper than a quarter of a mile, and about the same breadth. On all sides were steep precipitous rocks. From the downs to the edge of the water there was no flat surface of rock as large as a table; and yet, although few knew it, a precipitous path led from the downs to the edge of the water. At one end of this bay was a low cave. At high water there

was more than twelve feet between the surface of the water in this cave and the average height of the roof. In summer, pleasure parties from Rockfall now and then visited the cave; but as it was shallow and unromantic in form, visitors were not many in summer, and in winter no one from the town came to see it.

Only one thing in this cave was at all worthy of attention. From the roof, about midway from the sides, depended a huge mass of smooth slippery rock. At high water there were only two feet clear between the end of this rock and the water. Where this huge mass joined the roof the roof was loftiest. Even at high water twenty-two feet of perpendicular height stretched between the surface of the water and the roof. By the aid of a torch, it could be seen that the greatest circumference of this mass of rock was at its base. It sharply lost bulk as it approached the roof. At its base it measured about seventy feet in circumference. Fifteen feet higher up



it could have been no more than fifty. This fact gave those who looked at it a notion of its insecurity, and the feeling of its insecurity, together with the slimy slipperiness of its sides and the absolute absence of any foothold on its surface, prevented holiday folk making any curious examination of its point of juncture with the roof. Indeed, there was a firm belief among those people of Rockfall and Greenlee who knew of its existence or had visited it, that some time or other, and at no very distant date, the huge polypus in the gorge of the cavern would fall down, bringing death to whomsoever might be in the cave at the time.

And yet there was not the least cause for fearing to trust the weight of twenty human bodies to the great Bell of the Barnacle Cave, as the rock was called.

The rock sloped towards the top like a bell, and on the side of the Bell farthest from the mouth of the cave there was a deep indentation, which followed the shank of the bell not only

to the roof but passed like a chimney into the roof. None of the ordinary sightseers of Rockfall had ever clambered up the slippery sides of the Bell. None of them had stood in that niche and looked upward. If they had done so without a light at ordinary times they would have been conscious of but one thing, the sound of water plashing in a hollow vault above their heads.

On Christmas Eve, 1848, at six o'clock, if any ordinary sightseer of Rockfall had scaled the slippery sides of the great Bell of Barnacle Cave, he would not only have heard the splash of water falling in the undreamed-of cavern above, he would have seen a surprising and affrighting sight as well.

He would have found a vast hollow in the cliff, a hollow much more extensive than the cave beneath, dimly revealed by the light of many candles and ships' lanterns, and on the floor of the cave, lying on tarpaulins and mats, about twenty men in stout pilot-cloth coats

and sea-boots, lying about in all directions—some smoking, some playing cards, some conversing. Against one of the sides of the cave stood the port lamp of a sailing ship, and from it flowed a bright crimson flood of light that gave a mysterious splendour to the damp walls and the bearded men, making the strange scene like an oriental dream.

If a sightseer from Rockfall or Greenlee had got up on the great Bell that night he might have seen that spectacle. But below, in the lower cave, lay a yawl with five men in it. The sightseer would never have seen those men or that boat unless he had carried a light. Had the sightseer come that night the men in that yawl would have seen his boat enter the mouth of the cave, and if the stranger did not whisper the words: "*Vigil of the Moon*, ahoy!" the chances are he would never have seen anything outside that cave again.

It is even doubtful whether the inquisitive stranger could have got so far as the entrance of

the lower cave, for under the shadow of the rocks at the mouth of Barnacle Bay was another yawl with five men more, busy fishing, and would not have endured any intruder in those quiet waters, unless, indeed, he was courteous enough to whisper, as he came quite close: "*Vigil of the Moon*, ahoy!"

When Markham Spalding reached the edge of the cliffs above Barnacle Bay he was completely at a loss how to act. He felt certain that his father had not gone to Southampton. What could he do?

He was heated with walking, and sat down on the short moss-like grass to rest and think. He placed the parcel of nails beside him. The old mechanical instinct still made him careful of his parcel. He had bought the tacks with a view to diverting suspicion from his visit to town that day. He had by this time quite forgotten the object of the purchase, but he remembered it was part of his scheme of self-defence.

He knew the precipitous path to the water's edge was close to where he sat. But on so dark a night as this the boldest man on the coast would not dare to descend it. Even suppose he could get down, what then? He had no boat. He could not communicate with the cave; he could not signal the *Vigil of the Moon*. He had not been admitted to all the details of this scheme as far as Barnacle Bay and the Cave were concerned. The place for the part he had been asked to play was over there in the darkness at Greenlee.

What portentous things hung high aloft in this night! Should the cloud of misery fall, whom would it destroy? What hopes — and lives — would be lost in this awful dark?


He could do nothing here. Where could he do anything? His father-in-law was at home with his wife. Here he was powerless; there something might even still be achieved. He would start off at once towards home.

Standing up, he once more put his parcel of nails under his arm, once more looked out to sea, and tried to pierce the dense darkness that shrouded the invisible expanse at his feet. Not a speck arose to challenge the sight out of the vast chaos of uninformed void,

It was now close upon eight o'clock. In two hours more all would be decided. He was quite certain that up to this nothing untoward had occurred,

He paused a moment to readjust the string on his parcel of nails. The parcel had got untidy and flabby. While so engaged, his eyes being turned still towards Barnacle Bay, he saw a crimson ribbon of light shoot for a moment across the waters of the bay. In an instant all was dark again.

"That's a port light," he thought. "That's the signal;" then looking round and waving his hand through the dark he whispered to his mind: "All may go well yet. It may not be necessary to resort to the last extremity."



Having made this reflection he struck out once more across the downs, having two miles and a half to walk before reaching the western or nearer shore of Greenlee Cove.

Do all he might he could not hurry. He felt he was risking tremendous disaster by not hastening to Greenlee. The secret of which he was in possession, and which was now being developed at his feet, was too strong for him, and he could not tear himself away from it.

It was fully nine o'clock before Markham Spalding arrived at the slight rise of ground which forms the coastguard's Look-out Hill at the entrance of Greenlee Cove. He had hugged the cliffs all the way. Knowing every inch of the coast, he felt no fear of accidentally falling over.

"Look-out Hill," he thought. "Now to try to see if all is safe so far." He ascended the little hill cautiously, for the ground was somewhat broken.

At last, feeling the freshness of the sea upon

his face, he knew he was on the summit, and stood upright. At that moment a voice quite close to him called out: "Who's that?"

"Markham Spalding, coastguard."

"All right, Mr. Spalding. I was just trying to make out something down there, and didn't notice you until you touched me."

"What's down there, and where?"

"I saw a light, like a skylight light they cover up, when the covering blows away. It was soon covered up again. But I saw it. Not a boat, but a craft with standing rigging; I think a dandy smack, that's been dodging off and on all day. Any way that's my suspicion. I'm going to call the captain, sir. He left word he was at your place, sir. Will you come?"

"No. I'll wait to see the light again. What do you think of her?"

"She's in there for no honest purpose, sir. Good-night."

"Do you think you'll put off?"

"Not a doubt of it. Good-night."

Spalding did not reply to the man's "Good-night." When he was alone he lay down with his face towards Barnacle Cliff, and said in his mind, while he felt the clammy sweat ooze through his pores; "Going is easy work; but getting back is the difficulty on this night. What a fool Colville was to leave orders he was to be called. Well, I can do nothing to stop matters now. The worst must come."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE LAUNCHING OF THE BOAT.

WHEN the look-out man left the cliff at the entrance to Greenlee Cove he had a considerable distance to walk before he reached the village, at the southern end of which the coastguard house stood and the coastguard boat was beached.

East of Greenlee there was no station nearer than eight miles, but as in the whole of those eight miles existed not a single spot where a boat could land, that stretch of coast was allowed to take care of itself. Boats could land at Greenlee; boats and even small vessels could get into Barnacle Bay, the latter with

great danger to themselves ; ships of almost any tonnage might safely seek the protection of Rockfall Harbour. But, as no landing-place at Barnacle Bay was known by the coastguards, and as there was no other opening in the inhospitable cliffs from Greenlee to Rockfall, the coastguards confined their vigilance almost exclusively to the village and the town, the five men stationed in the village having charge of four out of the five miles of coast between Greenlee and Rockfall. Captain Colville was the chief officer of the whole district, and resided at Rockfall, making occasional visits to his outlying stations. On Christmas Eve, when he got to Greenlee, he announced his arrival to the man in charge there.

As soon as Captain Colville had disposed of his official business he sought his daughter's house. She was in, busy making some preparations for the morrow. He told her he had seen Markham in town, and that he said he would be back by-and-by. As soon as supper

was over, about eight o'clock, and Captain Colville had made himself a glass of grog and filled his pipe, he opened the subject nearest to his heart.

"Minnie," he said, after a few whiffs of his pipe, "I have noticed that of late you do not seem so—so well as of old, as a few months ago; how is that?"


She affected a smile and a laugh, and answered as gaily as she could: "Oh father, I am quite well. It's only the change from the town to this village. I suppose that makes me dull."

"Then, child," he insisted very quietly, "if you are not unwell you are unhappy, and that is nearly worse."

"It's only a little passing trouble, father; don't take any notice of it. It will be gone soon."

"If I thought, child, he was bad or unkind to you I'd——"

She threw her arms round his neck, drew



down his hand which he had raised in threat, and burst out crying on his shoulder.

"No, father," she sobbed, "he has not been bad or unkind to me. Indeed he has not. Only—only—I suppose all girls feel strange when they go away from home; and I suppose they all feel low-spirited at times until they get used to the new place and the new people around them, and—and—and—— No, father, indeed he has not been bad or unkind to me."

Her father and her husband were the only beings to whom her gentle affectionate nature owed allegiance of love. A little while ago, in the heyday of her happiness in her new home, a cloud had suddenly swept in between her and her husband. That cloud had blackened up her happiness for many a weary day and night. And now her father, the only other being on earth whom she loved, had come to her and questioned her about her happiness. And she had broken down wholly at finding herself thus face to face with the love of her childhood

still as it always had been to her, and the love of her womanhood marred and obscured.

"My child," he said softly, "I don't want to make any harm between you and him, but if I heard of any other person coming between him and you——"


She started back from him pale and tearless. Awhile she stood regarding him rigidly. Then she said through her bloodless lips: "Father, tell me all you know. I can bear anything, so long as it is true."

"My child, my child," cried the father, letting fall his pipe and starting up, shocked and alarmed at the effect his words had produced upon her. "I know nothing, heard nothing, suspect nothing."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure, my darling child. Don't, don't, don't."

She raised her two hands and clasped them on her bosom and looked up, saying softly in a whisper to herself: "I do not care for anything if it is not that."



At this moment a knock sounded at the door. The father looked in fright from the pale rigid face of the girl to the door, whispering: "Here he is, Minnie! Here he is!"

"No," she whispered back in the tone of one speaking in sleep. "It is not he; he never knocks."

Captain Colville went to the door and opened it. "Who's there?"

"John Grainger, sir, come to report suspicious-looking light close in shore about the Barnacle Cliff; and to ask for orders."

"Who saw the light?"

"I, sir,"

"What did it look like?"

"I thought it was like a skylight light she had covered up, and the covering blew away."

"Anyone else see the light?"

"No, sir. At least I think not. I left Mr. Spalding up there trying to make her out."

"Where did you say Mr. Spalding was?" asked the wife. She had come to the door.

"On Look-out Head, ma'am, trying to make out the strange light."

"Are we to go out to her, sir."

"Yes, and I will go with you, Grainger."

The man retired. Colville took his daughter tenderly in his arms, and led her back into the room, saying: "Now, Minnie, Mark will be in presently. Not a word of what we have been speaking about. And don't wait up for me. I shall be late."

Captain Colville, accompanied by the coast-guardsmen, walked in the blind darkness from Spalding House to the Watch House. At the Watch House he gave orders for the immediate summoning of the other men and the launching of the boat.

Not a man, woman, or child was stirring about the streets of the village. The people were all indoors, preparing for the next day or inaugurating the festival. When, however, the keel of the revenue yawl grated on the gravel a few men lounged out to see what could cause anyone to

launch a boat at such an hour on Christmas Eve. The occurrence was altogether an uncommon one. The fishermen who came out of their houses knew the regulations of the service too well to ask questions ; they merely stood round in the dark listening to the preparations of the revenue men. The idlers knew that something very unusual must be the matter when the broad-arrow boat was putting out to sea at such an unseasonable time and night. But the night was dark and forbidding, and as soon as the boat was afloat the fishermen chose rather to go back to their warm firesides or beds than to climb the slopes and try to discover the cause of this untimely expedition.

Counting the portion of waters of the Cove the boat had to traverse and the passage from the Cove to the sea, it was hal-fa-mile from the place where the boat was launched to the outer walls of the cliffs.

The passage was very narrow, and on the western side near the mouth the cliffs hung over so much that they seemed in continual danger

of toppling down. At that point the passage was almost arched. High above hung the great bleak rocks suspended in air. The brightest sunshine of the longest summer day never reached the dark green waters that rose and fell in the entrance of that narrow pass. As far as light went that night it mattered nothing whether the cliffs met or not. The centre of the earth could not be more dark than the whole length of the narrow neck of water.

"Ease three and four, unship three and four, one and two easy," said Captain Colville in a low voice as they entered the jaws of the chasm.

The measured strokes of the oars rose and fell upon the silence up through that dark abyss like the breathing of a strong man dying hard.

When the boat had got halfway through the cleft Colville asked the man by his side: "Is it safe to pull all oars yet?"

"No, sir, not till we're in the open; it's awful dark."

"Dark as a grave," said Colville, as he entered the last hundred yards of the cleft.

No other word was spoken.

For a moment the village seemed shaken to its base, a loud roar and crash, followed by a shriek of waters. Then all was still.

The terrified half-clad villagers flew out into the streets, calling to one another: "An earthquake, an earthquake! Come out of your houses, or they will fall upon you and kill you!"

Men went down to the beach, and came back with news that the water of Greenlee, the water that never knew a ripple, was violently dancing in its narrow bed; dancing and leaping and foaming as it never had danced in the memory of man before; they could hear the terrified waters leap and rave in their agony. The tide too had risen! Risen a foot higher than ever water rose in that Cove before.

An earthquake! Was the water rising or the earth sinking? Were they all to be lost in the dark, all swallowed up by the blind and insatiable night?

A sudden panic seized the people, and with one accord they commenced preparing for hasty flight.

At that moment a hatless man stole quietly down the main street, turned to the right, and entered the room where Minnie still sat, too much horrified to move.

In the light this man presented a ghastly spectacle. His hair stood upright on his head, his cheek was cut open from the cheekbone to the jawbone, he was bleeding profusely, and seemed scarcely able to stand.

"The boat," he whispered hoarsely—"who was in the boat?"

"Five men and my father," she whispered back, not daring to go near him, not daring to fly, not daring to think.

"Your father! Your father! In God's mercy let me die!" He staggered to the door, opened it, and tottered over the threshold; his knees gave way under him, and with a heavy moan he fell headlong into the dark.

Part II.

THE DARKNESS CLOSES ROUND.

CHAPTER I.

RETCARD'S THEORY AND PRACTICE.

WHEN Markham Spalding left the bar-parlour in Rockfall after the interview with Retcard, the latter found himself with a considerable portion of time on his hand, and nothing very particular to do but to wait. He thought of many ways of passing the time, and at last decided upon one.

He went out to the friendly potman, and asked if he could have a light in the parlour and the use of the room for an hour or two. He hinted

to the man that matters of great pith and moment hung upon the events occurring and about to occur in the parlour, and communicated in confidence to his awed and admiring listener that he hoped to get hundreds of pounds in the course of the evening. The amazed potman cordially consented, and promised that no one who did not ask for the clerk should be admitted to the room. To insure this the potman locked the door from the parlour to the shop, and put the key in his pocket.

Bring me some gum now, and a few sheets of paper, and an ounce of tobacco, and a quartern of gin," said Retcard, as soon as the door was locked, and the potman once more inside the bar.

When the gum and paper, and tobacco and gin had been brought, Mr. Retcard proceeded to combine business with pleasure. He took the pieces of the letter out of his pocket once more, and swallowed a deep draught of gin-and-water.


He commenced arranging again the fragments

of the letter into their original relations to one another. He proceeded this time much more quickly than before. Now he had for a guide a knowledge of the matter on the paper. In less than half-an-hour he had all of them settled as when Spalding had come in and broken up the result of his previous labours. This time he had arranged the fragments on a sheet of paper. He now placed another sheet of paper down on the face of the letter, cautiously turned the sandwich thus formed with its face down; then, lifting off the top sheet, he exposed the back of the fragments. With the gum-brush he went over the entire surface of the paper he had lifted off, and when it was covered with a thin coat of gum he laid it with the gummed side down on the back of the fragments, and patted it until they all adhered. Having turned up the sheet and smoothed the pieces, he had the letter exactly as it was when it first met the eyes of Markham Spalding in the building-shed at Greenlee that day.

The contents of the letter were as follow :


"To-night at ten o'clock. I count upon your aid. Remember what I gave and what I am prepared to give him and you. Five you've had, five more you shall have, and a thousand for him if you get him to prevent them going out to-night. Prevent him without buying him and you shall have all. I don't care how. Whether you do or not we are safe. Give bearer five shillings."

There was no date, no signature. For a long time Retcard regarded the document through a cloud of tobacco smoke. He took several sips of gin to assist his reason and imagination. Gin had cost him his situation ; perhaps, in return, it would help him to a fortune. One quartern of gin gave him only a glimpse of what he might see clearly through two. Accordingly, when the first quartern was drunk he ordered a second, and resumed his study of the riddle.



His latest master would never have parted from Retcard if Retcard would have been satisfied with even two quarterns of gin at a time. Retcard was very capable and clever, and had even a ray of genius, and no trace of a conscience. He was almost the ideal of a lawyer's clerk, barring his tendency to liquor; and drink had now brought him to the condition in which all the most useful qualities of his mind lay dormant until he was half drunk. When quite sober he now possessed but one essential quality of a good lawyer's clerk, namely, an easy conscience.

At the end of the second quartern of gin he believed he had discovered a clue to the meaning of the document. He already felt the two-hundred-and-fifty pounds within his grasp. All was plain to him now. He should himself become an attorney with the money, and cut the business from under the feet of his old master. What a splendid thing to have such an intellect as his; it surely deserved another quartern, that intellect of his. But he must not go too far,




for Spalding would be back presently with the gold in a bag, and he should require all his faculties about him.

So far as a careful scrutiny of the letter and the aid of such hints as he gathered from abroad and supplied from within himself, he decided thus :

The letter was from someone, he did not know whom, to young Spalding, asking the latter to do something which would prevent something else being done to-night at ten o'clock. The manner of young Spalding, and his apparent willingness to entertain the question of giving two-hundred-and-fifty pounds for the letter, convinced the clerk that the thing requested in the letter was an illegal act, or something in aid of an illegal act.

Retcard had heard all the gossip about Spalding's marriage, how he had got five hundred pounds from his father at that time, how his father had been almost ruined by recent financial disasters abroad. Then he reflected



that as five hundred pounds more were offered to young Spalding and one thousand pounds to someone else, the matter involved must be of great magnitude indeed. If, as he (Retcard) now assumed, the letter was from William Spalding to his son, what could be the meaning of it? What could young Spalding do, and upon whom could he be supposed to have influence enough to make him and his friend worth two thousand pounds at ten o'clock this night?

All at once, through the magic lens formed by two-and-a-half quarterns of gin, he saw the figure of Colville, the captain of the coastguards, and the father-in-law of young Spalding.

The rest was easy. Nothing could be plainer. William Spalding was engaged in some vast smuggling operations and had written this letter to insure the co-operation of his son and the captain of the coastguards. There was, however, just one thing he could not clearly understand. What was the meaning of the passage: "Whether you do or not, we are safe"? That was an

insoluble mystery to him. One thing he clearly understood, the reason why young Spalding was about to spring on Vaggers when Vaggers asked him for his five shillings. In Spalding's confusion he thought the "five" had reference to the hundreds, and that the tramp had penetrated the secret.

While Retcard pondered and drank his gin and smoked his pipe, the time appointed for Spalding's return passed, and did not bring the young man. The third quartern of gin had now disappeared, and the splendid side of Retcard's imagination was dominant. Here he had come upon a nefarious scheme to cheat the revenue; here was a great glorious opportunity of denouncing a criminal and earning a vast reward. Young Spalding had gone away with his offer of the letter for two-hundred-and-fifty pounds. Young Spalding had not come back. He had kept his word, and waited for the young man. He had behaved honourably—nobly. Now there was nothing left for him to do but to inform

on the smugglers, do justice to his injured country, and earn a munificent reward. A man with such cards in his hand might surely be allowed one more quartern of gin to give him dignity for playing these cards.

He ordered another quartern, and sat with great solemnity of manner as he sipped it—neat. Retcard had a theory that having drunk three quarterns of gin diluted with water his head became affected, and that the only safe way of returning to perfect sobriety was by a quartern of gin neat. It was part of this theory that when he had swallowed a fourth of the liquor in little sips, the best way was to swallow what remained at a draught.

The gin thus rapidly consumed neat made Retcard always feel very comfortable for a few minutes, and somewhat vaguely wise. This sensation of wisdom was the vindication of Retcard's theory about neat gin. The theory was perfectly justified, and the theory having been justified he felt that it would be modest and christian-

like to step down from the intellectual pinnacle he had reached. Accordingly he did step down. The beginning of the descent from the pinnacle was marked by his filling another pipe. When he had come down the whole way from the pinnacle to the base he did one of two things—offered to fight someone, or fell asleep.


As he was alone in the bar-parlour on this Christmas Eve he had no opportunity of offering fight, so he accepted the more pacific solution, and fell asleep.

He slept a long time, and did not wake until the potman put a hand on his shoulder and shook him softly, saying: "Mr. Retcard, it's closing time; get up, sir; it's closing time."

He roused up very slowly, repeating after the potman: "Closing time, closing time." He stood up and steadied himself by putting one palm flat on the table. Then he turned to go.

"Won't you take your papers?" asked the potman.

"Of course I will," said Retcard solemnly and




reproachfully, as though an injury had been done him and a reflection cast upon his sobriety by the implied suspicion that he might forget them. He gathered up the papers and staggered out of the parlour into the shop.

His theory did not reach his present stage of intoxication. He had now completely forgotten all the events of the past twenty-four hours. He knew it was closing time and that he should have to leave the public-house. Unarmed with a theory he was completely at the mercy of a practice. After such a sleep as he had just been awakened out of the practice was to have more gin.

"Another quartern, neat," he asked of the potman.


"Are you able for it, do you think?" demanded the other considerably.

"Ay, and for you too," returned the clerk hotly, taking off his coat, throwing down his hat, and unsteadily assuming an attitude roughly resembling a very fierce and bloodthirsty pose.



Without further demur the potman filled him out the gin, assisted him to put on his coat, saw him swallow the liquor, and then assisted him out of the shop.

His gait was now unsteady, he staggered from one side of the footway to the other. His theory and practice of drinking gin were now at an end ; but in a dim dull way some memory of the evening's events must have come back to him, for instead of turning home he went out of the town and commenced slowly and laboriously ascending in zigzags the slope leading to the eastern downs. In his hand he clutched the paper on which were gummed the fragments of the letter. When he awoke next morning he felt very stiff and cold. He was conscious that someone was stealthily trying to open his hand. He was lying on his back. He looked up and saw between him and the sky the figure of William Spalding. In a moment he realised the situation. Last night, he being drunk, had wandered to the downs, fallen asleep on them,



and was now found there by, of all men in the world, the writer of the letter.

"Let me go, Spalding," cried the clerk.

"If you move or speak you are a dead man," whispered Spalding close to his ear, at the same time pointing a pistol at his head.

CHAPTER II.

HEARD HIM SAY HIS PRAYERS.

THE night of Christmas Eve, 1848, was one of horror and consternation at Greenlee. No one knew what had occurred but one man, Markham Spalding, now lying insensible in his own house. When he fell out across the threshold of his own house on hearing that Captain Colville was in the coastguard boat, his wife had rushed to him, and implored a few of the terrified neighbours to help her to get him into the house.

“Into the house!” they cried at first. “Into the house! why, we are all leaving our houses. There has been an earthquake, and the houses have been shaken and may be shaken again,

and then they will fall, and the water in the Cove is mad and rising—listen to it—mad and rising!”

She did not heed them. She only said: “Help me in with him. Oh, help me in with my husband. I saw the blood on his face. Help me, ah, please help me to carry my hurt husband in!”

They gathered round him and lifted him, and carried him in and placed him on his bed. It was then found that his injuries were serious. There was no doctor in the village. Although he was insensible, those around him did not think him dangerously hurt. The cut in his cheek was ugly looking, and he had a bruise on his head, but the men said he would be all right in the morning. They plastered his face, opened his necktie and collar, and took off his boots.

Then having called the fisherman's little daughter and sent her to Spalding's, they left.

By this time the terror had somewhat subsided.

Men had lighted fires upon the edge of the Cove, and ascertained that the tumult in the waters had begun to abate, and that, allowing for the wash of the waves on the sand, the tide was only a very little higher than the average. They still had no clue whatever to the cause of the extraordinary noise and disturbance.

By-and-by the people who at first had fled from their houses and rushed up the slopes in the belief that either the water was rising and would overwhelm the village, or that the ground was subsiding and the place would be engulfed, began to return to their houses. But all thought of going to bed that night was abandoned.

Two huge additional fires were lighted on the beach, and around the fires the people gathered. Now and then the men went down to the margin of the water and came back with favourable reports. The water did not gain upon the sand, and the commotion was gradually going down.

At eleven o'clock the men returned with the

reassuring intelligence that the tide had, as in the natural order of things, begun to fall.

Still the people would not go back into their houses, although they were losing their most violent apprehensions. They piled more wood upon the fires, and the women crouched among their children, and the men discussed in low tones the possible causes of the unaccountable phenomenon.

At one o'clock the report was still good. The tide continued to fall, and the waters of the Cove were almost quite still.

At this time six young men, the most daring and adventurous of the village, got together, and were noticed to be eagerly debating some subject. At length the group broke up; two went towards the houses and four towards the beach.

Presently the two who had gone back to the houses reappeared with lamps, and from the beach was heard the grating of a boat's keel on the sand. The elder men moved to the

beach, saying to one another, in mingled triumph and fear: "They're going to launch a boat!"

The mothers and sisters of these six young men, hearing what they were about to do, began clamouring and wailing, and crying that the lads would never come back again to the village. But the fathers of the boys, although the hearts of the fathers were with the lads, drew back the women, and bade them be still and let the boys win their manhood of danger and the sea, as they themselves had done before. "Our sons," they said, "should be bold enough to fear no man, and good enough to stand in no dread of God. Why should they stand in fear of anything? they are brave and good christian lads."

So the boat was launched, and the six young men got into it and shoved off, four men being at the oars, one steering, and one in the bow with two lamps.

Meanwhile, Markham Spalding lay insensible on his bed, and Minnie sat by him and watched.


When Spalding's young wife saw her husband that night, his appearance—his wounds, the blood, his staggering out of the house, his falling unconscious over the threshold out into the dark, all coming upon the distracting tumult immediately preceding—numbed her to other thought save the one of succouring him, succouring him who had mysteriously suffered in some astounding convulsion of nature.

The memory of all his recent strange ways and careless manner fled like fallen leaves before a storm. All was forgotten, except that he lay there maimed and marred, and that he was her loyal lover of years, her wedded husband, her first and only love. Her father, who knew everything about Rockfall and all round, had assured her she need fear no rival. What then need she fear that she cared about? Nothing in all the world, except harm to him. Now he lay helpless, and in need of all her loving aid. He should have it over and over a thousandfold, and when he came to himself and was healed of

his hurts, he would be to her as he had been in the rich, love-lighted background of the past.

She saw the people outside light the fires, and she could hear their words. One of the fires was just under the room she sat in. She could hear the people talk round it, and she could hear her young husband breathing softly on the bed. When the young men launched the boat it was hard by the fire under her window. She had gathered through her ears the rumour of the general panic, but no fear had come to her out of it. Her husband was hurt and could not move. Let the waters rise and engulf them both. The great dark abroad, the great dark of her past few weeks, were still about her, though now she did not feel their presence. If the water rose and rose and sucked him and her into it, no worse could be than had been.

When they launched the boat she stole to the bed, and judged by the injured man's breathing that he grew better. The breathing was slower



and easier, there was little snoring, and the hands and feet were beginning to feel warm. He was recovering, and now, as he had come back hurt through the darkness of the night, perhaps the darkness that had fallen on them of late would pass away. Perhaps when he awoke he would call her to his side and tell her all. She heard from her father, who ought to know, that no other woman had stolen away his affection from her. What did she care about anything between him and her but his love? No matter what his secret might be, it would, it could, make no difference between them, since he was still love-true to her. If her father were only back!


The man on the bed turned and groaned.

She ran to him and touched his wrist, and knew that he would soon awake. When he had groaned she was standing at the window following the course of the boat as it proceeded slowly and cautiously along the shore with the two lights burning in the bow.

The boat would no doubt bring back news

of her father. She was sufficiently acquainted with sea matters to know that the commotion in the Cove could prove no source of danger to the fine revenue yawl of Greenlee. And yet Markham seemed to think there might have been danger, for he asked most eagerly who was in the boat, and he said wild words when he heard that her father was with the men. But then he was badly hurt, and most likely had got a violent fright about whatever had occurred, so that his words were not to be taken at their seeming value. Indeed, in the alarm and relief of the moment, and the new dread when she saw him fall, she had no clear recollection of what he had said. When he recovered she should ask him, and know exactly what he feared, if her father were not back by the time.

But the chance of her father's return for hours was small, for he had gone off to some ship a distance down the coast, and he might meet with delay on board the vessel, and then



he'd have to row back, all of which would take time. But as she should be sitting up with Markham, her love, her poor wounded husband, she should hear the boat come back, and hear her father's footstep, and go and let him in.

Hark! the sound of oars! It was now some time since the exploring boat had left the open waters of the Cove and entered the strait leading to the sea.

Her husband moaned faintly. She sprang to him from the window, where she had been trying to see what boat it was.

Spalding opened his eyes slowly and feebly, and looked up at her, saying in a low weak whisper: "Minnie, my wife."

She threw herself on the bed beside him, and laughed and wept and kissed his forehead, and touched his face tenderly as a little child touches the faces of those it loves well. "Your own wife, Mark. Your own wife. Your own poor Minnie. Isn't it all over now, my love? Isn't the darkness that fell between us gone

now for ever, Mark, my husband, my love?" She put her head on the pillow beside his, and wept soft tears, the gentle healing tears that fall upon the tomb of grief within the pure and healing light of hope new born.

His ears were still dull and haunted by the great roar and shrieks that had that night gone up from the coast. His mind was still weak and far away from his memory. Of what she had said to him he heeded no more than "Isn't it all over now?" That fixed itself in his mind, for it found a niche in his thoughts. Slowly and with great labour he said: "Yes, it is all over now. I crawled to the edge of the cliff after it. I looked down and heard the black teeth of the waves munching the rocks. I heard the waves snarl and hiss and grind the rocks. But I could see nothing. Dark as it was a greater darkness seemed to close round me." He paused a moment as if listening. She could hear nothing, think of nothing, but his words.

"Well, my poor love?" she whispered.



"I could see nothing, but I could hear—hear his voice——"

She rose into a sitting attitude and gazed wildly at him. "Whose, whose voice?" she asked.

"I could hear him say his prayers. I could hear him say out loud, 'Into Thy hands,' and then no more. I was hurt, and I think I fainted. Do you hear steps outside—many heavy steps?"

"Yes, go on. Who was it?"


"I could have saved him. I've been playing the most awful game ever man played. I could have saved him, and I did not."

"For mercy's sake tell me the name if you know it." She was now standing on the floor, holding on by the footrail of the bed.

"Do you hear those feet outside? They are in the hall."

"Oh, kill me, but let me know!"

His strength was now almost spent, and his mind quite insensible to everything round him. "I heard him say his prayers. I was on the cliff and looked over, and I could have saved him, and



his blood is between her and me for ever!" He fell back insensible.

"Markham! Oh Markham, my love, his head is hurt and he is mad!"

The fisherman's little daughter who helped in the house opened the door and held it wide, and looked in speechless terror at the mistress, saying: "They've brought him in. They did not know I was on the stairs. I saw him when they took the hat off his face, and put on the handkerchief, and—— Oh, he's dead."

"Who?"

"The captain!"


CHAPTER III.

WHAT EDWARD HARFIELD SAW AND HEARD.

As it has been already said, for some days before Christmas Eve, 1848, the weather on the southern coast of England had been wild and full of gales. Five days before Christmas Day the brigantine *Samuel Johnson*, of Portsmouth, left Waterford, bound, with a cargo of oats and bacon, for London. When the vessel sailed out of the Suir the captain hoped he might be able to get "round the land" and reach up as far as Portsmouth by Christmas. If he could do so, and find any reasonable or unreasonable excuse, he should put into Portsmouth, where his home was, and spend Christmas with his family.

The wind for two days was strong and baffling, and on the morning of the third day, being two days before Christmas, he found himself driven out of his course, and calculated that he was somewhat north of Carnsore Point, and no more than fifteen miles off the Wexford shore. It was so thick he could see nothing. Towards noon the weather brightened, and the wind, which had been almost due south and a whole gale, drew round to the west, and he was enabled to make a long reach on the starboard tack. The *Samuel Johnson* was weatherly and behaved well on a wind, so that in spite of strong wind and a heavy cross-sea, on the morning before Christmas Eve the brigantine had the Land's End aboard on the port bow.

The *Samuel Johnson* held her reach until noon, when she was about twenty miles due south of the Lizard, the wind having fallen away in the meantime and the vessel rolling and pitching a good deal. The captain's intention had been to make a little southern offing and run up with the westerly breeze along the land.



At noon, however, two unforeseen things happened. The wind backed into the southward, and even to the eastward of south for awhile, and the vessel began to make water.

The leak was not important in itself, but the captain could not tell how it might increase, and beating a passage up-channel in such a sea while the ship was making water could not be thought of, particularly as he had a perishable cargo on board. Taking all this into account he announced his intention of running into Rockfall.

The apprentice on board the *Samuel Johnson* was Edward Harfield. As soon as he heard that they were to put into Rockfall he made an excuse to go below, and when in the cabin alone treated himself to a double-shuffle and a number of oaths, indicating at once great precocity in swearing and great joy. When this little secret ebullition was over he went on deck and did his work in a spirit of demure alacrity. This struck the captain with surprise, for Edward had been apprenticed against his will, and did his work against the grain. He

wasn't exactly a bad boy, but wilful and headlong, and, before he was consigned to the sea, always in scrapes ashore.

All at once the solution of the mysterious alacrity struck the captain: "This chap lives, if I remember well, somewhere about this coast, and he's thinking of eating his plum-pudding at home." The captain as he came upon this explanation was belaying a rope. His memory was sore in many places because of this lad. He belayed the rope with unnecessary violence, and swore to himself with immense vigour that he'd see the lad in the last extremity of final punishment before he'd give him leave.

The lad, who was intelligent and knew his own faults and the master's disposition, had sworn just two minutes before that *he* would see the master in the last extremity of final punishment before *he'd* ask for leave.

It was the night before Christmas Eve when the *Samuel Johnson* dropped anchor in the harbour of Rockfall.

That night no one went ashore, not even the captain. The leak grew no worse, and the water was kept at eighteen inches by working the pumps ten minutes every hour.

Next day, Christmas Eve, the captain went ashore, noted a protest, and got some fresh green-meat, and fruit, and rum, to celebrate Christmas with. There was no use in his trying to do anything about the leak until after Christmas; no men could be got to begin a job on Christmas Eve. The captain had to abandon all thought of going home, the distance was too far from Rockfall to Portsmouth.

At seven o'clock the captain came aboard finally. He had not allowed the boy ashore at all; when going off himself he had taken an ordinary seaman with him instead of the boy.

As the captain threw himself over the side he saw the boy sitting on the battened-down hatch with a look of great pain on his face. He spoke to him, and asked him what the matter was. The captain expected the boy would say he was very

bad, and wished he might be allowed to go ashore to a doctor.

But the boy did nothing of the kind. He merely said he felt unwell, and would be greatly obliged if the captain would give him permission to turn in.

First the captain was suspicious ; he fell upon a clever plan. "Come aft," he said to the boy, "and I'll give you something that'll cure you." They descended to the cabin. "Now take off your boots and swallow this." He poured out a large glass of rum and held it out to the lad.

Harfield took off his boots, and swallowed the rum.

"He can't do much without his boots this weather," thought the captain. "Now," said he to the lad, "you can turn in as soon as ever you like, and stay there as long as you like, for it's Christmas Eve." Thought the captain : "He'll pretend to go and lie down now for an hour or so, and then he'll try and bolt, but I'll

be even with him. I'll go on deck in a quarter of an hour, and bring the oars and thole-pins down here. Ha, ha, Mr. Harfield!" cried the captain in his own mind.

When the boy came on deck he walked straight forward to where the men were standing round the caboose smoking. "There isn't another master afloat would send a fellow ashore such a time, and on a Christmas Eve too."

"What are you going for?" asked one of the men.

"Why, for blacking for his boots, as if grease isn't good enough for him. It's good enough for us."

"Shame!" cried the men in undertones.

Young Harfield walked aft, took an oar out of the ratlins, walked farther aft, and slipped down the painter. One of the men had followed, and when Harfield sang out "Let go!" the man undid the painter.

A quarter of an hour later the captain came on deck, and asked if the boy had turned in.

The men answered : " No ; he's gone to fetch the blacking for your boots."


The *Samuel Johnson* had only one boat, and there was no other vessel within hail, so the captain had to content himself with all the bad language he possessed befitting such an occasion.

When Edward Harfield gained the shore he laboured under two serious difficulties—he had no money and he had no boots. But then he had youth, high spirits, and freedom, and, although his home at Greenlee was five miles distant, he knew the downs well, and had no great dread of crossing them unshod ; their short mossy grass would not hurt feet much more tender than his.

He moored the boat at a slip on the end of the quay, and treading cautiously on the stones of the quay and street, gained the slope of the downs. Here he was quite at home. He felt no dread of pursuit, but he hastened on his way with the desire of getting as much ground as possible between himself and the hateful *Samuel Johnson*.

For the first twenty minutes he strode on at the top of his speed. Then he began to think a little, and the result of his thoughts was not very satisfactory. He had left all his clothes behind him in the brigantine, he had no boots, it was past nine o'clock at night, would be ten by the time he got home. Long before ten o'clock all his people, his mother, sisters, and grandmother, would be in bed, and he would think twice before knocking them up under the circumstances of his desertion. If he had only an overall he shouldn't mind it in the least; he could wrap himself up and lie down on the grass, and sleep till morning; it wasn't raining, although thick, and he had often faced worse at sea. But he had no overall, and now he felt inclined to shirk facing home. What should he do?

By this time it was more than half-past nine, and he drew close upon Barnacle Bay. To any one following the cliffs by night, and not knowing this bay, the danger was extreme. The downs



on the western side, the side by which young Harfield was approaching, went smoothly up to the top of a precipitous wall of cliff. The only warning those familiar with the coast had of their near approach to the edge of the bay was from the brow of the precipice. When Harfield reached that ridge on Christmas Eve he diminished his speed, and approached the edge of the bay with great caution.

"There is no hurry," he thought, "and it is better to keep on my feet than to lie down such a night as this. If I stayed in Rockfall someone from the *Samuel Johnson* might come across me; but here I am safe."

He was now within a few yards of the precipitous side of the bay. Suddenly he halted, shaded his eyes with his hand, and sought to pierce the darkness.

He heard sounds beneath him, the sound of oars—muffled oars.


He drew closer to the edge of the cliff, he crawled forward until his face hung over the

abyss, and he felt the salt freshness of the sea steaming up against his face. Here he remained perfectly still for a few moments, listening intently. Now, in addition to the sound of oars, he heard the sound of blows out in the middle of the bay. The blows he knew were struck by some sharp instrument on wood, and could not be from any boat, for there was a firmness and firm resistance in the sound which could be obtained from no boat. What could it be?

He knew the bay was cliff bound, and that no vessel ever entered it. What could these sounds be from?

All at once there was a flash of light from below, and he saw beneath him, halfway up the bay, a vessel, a dandy smack. He was enabled to see her rig and size by the fact that the light had flashed from the side of the vessel farther from him. The flash was only instantaneous, but a faint glimmer remained. By this glimmer he could follow the motions of the smack.

Just then the clouds and dulness overhead




grew a little less dense, and Edward Harfield could plainly make out not only the spars of the smack between him and the opposite side of the shore, but, looking down, he observed the hull, and a small boat ahead towing the smack.

His curiosity was profoundly excited. He could see much better from the other arm of the little bay. He set off at a run to reach the other side. When he was about halfway round, and just at the point where he knew the path descended to the water, he uttered a cry of pain and fell forward. At the same moment a loud crash, followed by a lesser crash, sounded beneath him.

Something had pierced his foot. He sat down on the grass and pulled something out of his foot, and felt it carefully in his hand. "A scupper nail!" he cried in alarm. "I wonder is it green or bright? I'll put it in my pocket, to see when I get out of this."

He paused awhile to squeeze the wound before sitting up, then creeping towards the brink of the bay he looked down.



The light had increased. He could now see the water of the bay pretty distinctly.

He stared in a chill terror, and clung to the grass as though seeking protection or in fear. The smack and the boat had disappeared wholly. He drew back, and turned his eyes towards home.

At that instant a lurid light flew up into the eastern sky. Then all was dark. Presently from the same direction came a loud flap, followed by a deep roll ; then all was dark and still.

What had happened at Greenlee ? What had happened at his feet ?


He shuddered before the affrighting questions. He could answer neither. At his feet the sea had swallowed a ship. Ahead of him the earth had belched fire.

CHAPTER IV.


"LET'S LYNCH HIM."

ALTHOUGH Edward Harfield had been afloat some time, and was familiar with all matters connected with the sea, he was staggered and appalled by the disappearance of the smack and the glare of light and war of noise in the east. He was familiar with every crevice of the coast from his boyhood, and yet he had never seen any decked vessel in Barnacle Bay before. It was a large smack too ; her burden could not be less than one-hundred-and-twenty to one-hundred-and-forty tons.

What had brought her in there, and what had become of her ? He knew no ship could founder



in so short a time. When he saw her first she was quite upright and in perfect trim. She had no way on worth speaking of. Even if she had gone against the cliffs she would scarcely have been damaged. It would have been easy to boom her off. The wind was light, she had no sails set, and in the little bay the sea was comparatively smooth. True, he had heard a crash—two crashes—but these sounds were not like the sound of a vessel bumping on hidden rocks or grinding against a cliff. If the vessel had foundered or gone down from some other cause, the bay could scarcely be deep enough to swallow up the hull and the heights of her masts as well. It was unlikely that a vessel foundering in such calm water would fall over at once. The chances were largely in favour of her masts—her topmast anyway—remaining above water for some time, for more time than it had taken him to get from one side of the bay to the end, including the delay caused by a nail he had picked out of his foot. And yet all had disappeared; all had been lost




in the dark of that gloomy bay. Not only had the vessel with her masts disappeared, but the boat which had been towing her as well. This was incomprehensible. No other mystery of the sea ever equalled this. The Phantom Ship was intelligible compared to this. What could it mean? What could it be?

When he heard the two crashes there was no human cry, no shout, no orders loudly given. There was the crash and nothing more. If the vessel had foundered or gone against the cliffs, surely some human voice would have risen up out of the depth of the darkness below.

What should he do now? His foot pained him very much, and he did not like facing home to-night under the circumstances of the late hour and his running away. If that nail were green with rust, his hurt foot would take a long time to heal, particularly if he got nothing done for it until morning.


At the rate he could now limp along it would be past eleven before he could gain Greenlee.



Then all the village would be in bed ; all, except the men in the coastguard watch-house. That was it ; the watch-house was the place for him. He'd tell the men that he got leave to spend Christmas at home, and that having carried his boots ashore in his hand they fell from him into the water, and were lost as he stepped out of the boat.

Having come to this resolution he got up and began his homeward way.


When he arrived at Greenlee he found the whole village, not asleep, but wide awake, and wild with affright. This being the state of affairs, he went straight to his mother's house. His mother and sister were down on the beach ; he sought and found them there, and briefly told them that he had got leave to come to them. In the dire confusion he was asked no questions, and for a long time following his return he kept silent as to his experiences of the night. As soon as the worst fears for the safety of the village had subsided, and the boat that had



gone to explore the Cove returned, bringing the dead bodies of Captain Colville and John Grainger, and the lad had heard of the vast quantity of cliff which had fallen into the narrow strait at the entrance of the Cove, he stepped out into the middle of a little crowd round one of the fires and began to speak. As his words stole into the silent night air by the huge fire, the people of the village gathered gradually round him until few of those who still remained abroad were out of earshot. Gradually the seafaring men and their wives and daughters became spell-bound and awed into interest by his story. His words were as follow :

"Now, I'll tell the truth : I've run away from my ship. I ran away from her this night. I pretended I had the skipper's orders to go ashore for blacking, and I hadn't. I slipped down the painter into the boat, sculled ashore, and here I am.

"As I was coming along the cliffs I looked over into Barnacle Bay, and while I was looking



into the bay I saw a light, and by the light a dandy smack. I got up—I was lying down when I saw her—and went round the bay to try and make her out plainer; she had a boat towing her when I saw her and all her sails stowed. On my way round the bay I hurt my foot. That kept me a little while back. I heard two sounds, two smashes in the bay, and then saw a flash or light in the east hereabouts, and after the flash I heard a great smash out this way in the east. That was when the cliff fell.”

He paused awhile and looked around. All the villagers in the light of the fire were listening with the most profound and amazed attention. At the mention of the light he had seen in the east they looked fearfully at one another; but no one spoke. Young Harfield went on:

“I never saw a smack or even a trawler in Barnacle Bay before. Did anyone here?”

“No,” in a hundred whispers from the bystanders.

“Well, I can’t tell you how it was, or hardly

believe my own eyes, but when I got halfway round the bay the smack was gone as clean as that;" he flung a pebble into the water of the Cove. "The smack did not founder or knock her brains out against the cliffs, for the boat too was gone, and I heard no word or cry."

The people shuddered and drew more closely together.

"Mind, I don't think you can believe me, but I saw the smack and I know that she wasn't in the bay a quarter of an hour after, as well as I know I am here now. What do you say to that?"

There was not a word of reply.

"Now, I say this: crafts don't come towing into Barnacle Bay for nothing, and then fly off in smoke. There's more in that smack than we can see. There's more in that smack than we can know now any way, than we shall ever know.

"But look here" (he seized a burning wand from the fire and flourished it above his head), "there's foul play in this somewhere, as sure as

that smack was in that bay. There was smuggling in her, and there was murder out there."

With the red wand he pointed to the narrow strait that led from the open sea to enclosed waters. A low moan went through the villagers. The men started back from him as though they feared a stain might touch them in even listening to his words; the women shuddered and looked uneasily over their shoulders.

"My belief is that they cut away the mast and the jigger of that smack, and opened scuttle-holes in her and sank her in the bay. If they did this they could come to her by night and hang about until she broke up and the barrels floated. What's the value of a dandy smack to a cargo of brandy? Nothing at all. No more than this piece of lighted wood to this fire.

"But I don't think smuggling was all. Smuggling may be against the law, but it isn't against human nature. We wouldn't mind a bit of smuggling, although we are an honest coast. But murder, cold-blooded murder, we can't and

won't stand. What I heard and saw, and what you heard, and what killed the men and choked the gut was—a *blast!*"

"*A blast!*" the men growled, and the women moaned.

"Someone was put on the watch, and when the boat was seen putting out he blew down the cliff on the boat. That's what I call damnable murder. Murder that deserves no mercy. To stand before a man and fight him fair is fair. But to blow down a cliff on men is the worst murder I ever heard of, and the man that did it shall——"

He paused and looked round once again. He was surprised at his own boldness ; he was amazed at its result. The fear that had pressed down upon the men around him had suddenly lifted, and in its stead a fierce rage had taken possession of them. They were angry with themselves for having allowed themselves to be frightened. They were angry with the man who had, as it were, cheated them into the fright. This man was an

odious murderer ; a cruel, cold, merciless murderer, who deserved no mercy. Away with him ! Death to him ! Lynch him !

They began turning back their sleeves and squaring their shoulders.

“Show him to us !” they cried.

“We have yet to find who he was,” replied Edward Harfield. “He must have been on the cliff at the time of the blast.”

“Let’s lynch him when we find him.”

“Did anyone see a man on the cliff about the time ?”

At that moment a ragged-looking man stepped hastily to the front, and said :

“I heard with my own ears young Spalding, the boat-builder, say he was there.”

CHAPTER V.

WAITING FOR LIGHT.

IT was the tramp Vaggers who stepped into the front of the fire, and said he had heard young Spalding say he had been on the cliff at the time of the explosion.


When he left the bar-parlour in Rockfall that evening he wandered about Rockfall for awhile. Then, thinking he could do nothing more in Rockfall, and that now, being in funds, he might as well get farther east, he started for Greenlee, and arrived there long after dark.

He could not do better than put up here for the night. He owed a grudge to Markham

Spalding ; Markham Spalding's sheds were not closed up at night ; why shouldn't he have a nice warm bed of shavings in one of the sheds ? Everybody knew there was no warmer bed in the world than shavings, with a nice thick layer of shavings for a counterpane.


In a corner of one of the sheds he took up his quarters for the night. He was awakened with the rest of the village, arose, and having climbed over the wall, found himself in the street where Spalding's house stood. He paused awhile outside it, recognising the place where he had got food that morning. He did not know whose house it was. To him it was merely the house that had succoured him.

He did not share the popular terror for two reasons : first, he did not know enough of Greenlee to feel alarm at the disturbance of the waters of the Cove ; and, secondly, as with all half-witted folk, he was always too keenly alive to his own personal affairs to devote much attention to non-personal affairs around him.



While he was standing idly in the street, the uppermost feeling in his mind was that someone ought to be made to suffer for waking him out of a sound sleep, and compelling him through surprise more than fright to abandon his warm corner. Just as he was about to move away, he saw a man stagger down the street and enter the house. He only saw the man's back, and did not recognise him. He was curious to see who this midnight visitor to his benefactress could be, and he slowly approached the door. As he got within a few paces the door opened, and a man with blood upon his face—a man whom he instantly knew to be Markham Spalding—staggered out into the street, saying: "I was on the cliff," and then fell heavily to the ground at his feet.

Now, a kind of terror seized upon Vaggers. To find the man against whom he had a spite fall insensible out of the house to which he owed gratitude was too perplexing a spectacle for his disordered mind. He would have liked



to kick the man as he lay, but he could not injure him in the light of the house that had sheltered and fed himself. Vaggers was a nomad of England, and had something of the appreciation of hospitality that prevails among the nomads of Arabia,

The conflict between his desire to take vengeance of the prostrate man and his disinclination to offer violence to one he regarded as under the protection of that roof was painful; so he did what delivered him from the situation—he fled.

It was after his flight a good while that he stepped out in front of the fire and said: “I heard with my own ears young Spalding, the boat-builder, say he was there.”

When the words were uttered, the crowd turned incredulously towards him.

“Why,” said one of the old men of the village, “Spalding has only just married Captain Colville’s daughter, and ’tisn’t likely he’d blow down the cliff on his father-in-law.”


"No, no," cried a chorus of people.

Vaggers seemed discomfited and abashed, and stepped into the background at once.

Then suddenly someone of the crowd made a connection between Vaggers's statement and the scene at Spalding's door soon after the disaster, and said in a half-timid voice: "Anyway, it is queer where Spalding got that cut on his face we saw when we raised him up."

"That's it!" cried young Harfield. "He was on the cliff, and a stone from the blast hit him. How could he get a cut on his cheek any other way? He wasn't under the blast, that's pretty sure."

The old man who had spoken before, and who was greatly looked up to in the village, met the youth with: "You're over young to be so forward. We do not know yet that there was any blast at all. I don't say but that you think you saw one, but there mightn't have been one. You might be mistaken, and young Spalding might get a cut face in many a way besides firing that blast, if there was one."



This speech had a very quieting effect on the villagers, and murmurs of approval followed it, and there was a loud cry from the crowd of "What shall we do, Father Tineworth?"

"My advice to you," said the old man, taking his pipe out of his mouth, and holding it between the thumb and finger of his left hand as he nursed his left elbow on his right hand, "my advice to you is to do nothing now. Wait until morning, then you will know if there was a blast, and then you will know if anyone of the village has had a hand in that blast. And if you get hold of the man that fired the shot, then I say——" The old man paused.

"Ay!" cried the men fiercely. "If there was a blast, and we get hold of him? Tell us the answer, Father Tineworth."

"Let the law take its course."

"The law be d——d!" cried the men fiercely. "No, no, Father Tineworth; no law for such as he."

The old man slowly let go his elbow, took

up an ember, and held it very deliberately to his pipe until the tobacco was relighted. Having taken a few whiffs, keeping his eye all the time on those around him as though to retain their attention, he said, slowly and softly: "I did not say whether I meant the law of the land or the law of the village. I leave you to settle that."

A fierce yell burst from the group of black-bearded men. They shook their fists in the air, and swore to one another. At last one suggested: "If we get him, let us throw him from Lookout Hill. That's the right death for him."

The men yelled in approval, and shook their hands; the women whispered and crowded together.


"Mind," repeated old Tineworth, in rectification of the sentence just spoken, "I did not say whether it was the law of the land or the law of the village. Take your choice."

That night few of the people of Greenlee went to bed. Although their fears of inundation

or earthquake were now fully at rest, there was much to discuss, and the men sat, lounged, and lay about the fires, smoking and chatting.


True, the village had not been destroyed, but six men had been foully murdered, or had lost their lives by an accident unprecedented in the history of that place. Then the mouth of the strait was closed up. How should they who fished the sea and got their living out of the sea now go to and from their village? The village, which had been so honest and so peaceful during the memory of man, had been visited by a terrible calamity. Were they, the men of it and their children, destined to starve now or to wander from their old homes in search of new ones among strangers? If all this was caused by man any death man could devise for the doer was too good. Throwing the miscreant murderer from the cliff was too lenient and merciful an end for such a scoundrel.

What had become of that mysterious smuggler craft seen by young Harfield in Barnacle Bay, that craft which had disappeared so inexplicably ?



The volunteers who had gone out in the boat that night and explored the strait, and found the bodies of Grainger and Colville and no more, explained the fact of the bodies of the other men being missing by the fact that Grainger and the captain had sat in the stern of the boat, and no doubt the forward part of the boat was that which had been struck by the inner end of the huge mass of cliff which had fallen down. Four poor fellows crushed to death by that huge avalanche of rock! The captain most likely did not die all at once. He had been found with his legs jammed between two masses of rock, and his body lying back, water borne. But poor Grainger could not have had a moment, his head was crushed in by a stone, and he lay on one of the fallen rocks close to his captain. No death was bad enough for him who had done all this.

The fury of the men mounted as the hours sped, and by daylight they were more like demons than men. Their village was ruined, their means of earning a livelihood was gone, and they



waited only for daylight to ascertain if this awful murder had not been the handiwork of a neighbour. If it were they would hurl him over that cliff, and, as he struggled in his death agony, stone him from the cliff.

Long before dawn four-score strong and desperate men of Greenlee were gathered together on the cliff above the fatal strait, waiting for the light to confirm their suspicions and justify their revenge. The dead bodies of their fellow-villagers were at their feet, their ruined village was at their back, and in their ears echoed the cries and wailings of the widows and orphans of the dead.

CHAPTER VI.

RETCARD AWAKES.

THAT same Christmas morning, when the four-score men waited on the cliff for daylight to find if there had been a blast, Retcard lay under the barrel of old Spalding's pistol on the downs. Old Spalding had come upon the sleeping man on his way back from Barnacle Bay just at break of day. Seeing a man asleep on the downs, not more than a mile from Barnacle Bay on that particular morning, was a thing not exactly in the line of the old man's desires. So he drew near Retcard to discover who he was, and anything else that might come to light upon close scrutiny.

He knew Retcard by appearance, knew him to

be a lawyer's clerk, but did not know his name. He did not by any means like the notion of a lawyer's clerk being so near the bay. It so happened that Retcard lay about a hundred yards from the brow of the cliff. This fact was a good deal in Retcard's favour. Had the clerk been very near the edge, William Spalding might have thought it safest not to trouble him to wake at all; he might have considered it wisest to push the little man gently over. That would have saved all danger, most likely spared the county the expense of an inquest, as the chances were the body would never be found.

But old Spalding found out that this sleeping man had a paper in his hand, that this paper was in his (Spalding's) handwriting, and that it was the very document of all others he would like least to see in the hands of anyone but the person for whom it was intended. Fury and perdition! Why did not his idiot son destroy that letter? Now that letter will destroy them.

Any risk must be run to secure that letter; any

danger must be faced to silence this man. With those reflections William Spalding stooped over the prostrate figure and began trying to steal the paper out of the closed hand. He held the paper in his left hand, the pistol in his right. Before he could secure the paper Retcard woke. Then Spalding threatened the clerk not only with the pistol-barrel but with words as well: "If you move or speak you are a dead man."

One of the peculiarities of Mr. Retcard when he drank a good deal too much over-night was that he awoke next morning not only particularly sober but in the enjoyment of excellent spirits and an easy, good-tempered, humorous frame of mind. It was not often he was awoke by the cold radiating from the muzzle of a pistol; indeed this experience was unique. But the whole position had to him a half-humorous aspect, and although he was keenly alive to his danger, there was, as in dreams, the half-assurance that he would get out of the difficulty without losing his life. The first requirement of his position was to gain time: the second to

defeat the enemy. If he could only achieve the former, he felt morally certain of the latter. His first words were:

“I am very glad it is you. To tell you the truth I got drunk last night, wandered out here, and fell asleep. You seem to want this paper; take it, it's no good to me. Now fire if you like.”

The excessive coolness of the clerk completely staggered William Spalding. This man was, he thought, telling a lie; but he had given him up the paper without a struggle, and he had told him to fire as though quite at rest on the matter, and as if he cared nothing for the paper or the bullet. The situation and the circumstances were peculiar and worthy of a little patience and inquiry.

“Sit up,” said old Spalding, still keeping the clerk covered with the pistol. “Sit up; I want to speak to you.”

It was not until Retcard tried to move that he found out how cold and stiff and wretched he was. He struggled into a sitting posture, shivered, and said very briefly: “Well?”

"How did you come by that letter?"

"I bought it for five shillings."

"From whom?"

"From the messenger that carried it to Greenlee, from the woman who hired him, to your son, Markham Spalding. Don't keep me long here, old fellow; either let me up to have a run and warm myself, or fire. There is a thick pocket-book in my left breast-pocket, and that might stop the bullet, so aim at my head."

Old Spalding frowned and wagged the pistol-barrel in a threatening way. "This fellow is as cool as he's cold," he thought, with a slight feeling of admiration. Already he felt he was over-matched by this undersized attorney's clerk. "Don't stir," he said aloud. "How did the messenger get it?"

"Well, when your son had read it, he threw the pieces down and walked away. The messenger stooped and took up the pieces and brought them to me for a legal opinion as to his power of recovering five shillings portorage, and I gave him his five shillings for the pieces and

put them together. You haven't got such a thing as a flask? If I don't get something to warm me I shall shake out all my teeth before you can knock them down my throat with your bullet."

Old Spalding handed him a flask, Retcard took a long draught, and said with a sigh: "Ah, that's better now."

The old man dropped the muzzle of the pistol and finally put the weapon in his pocket. He thought he might do better than shoot this man—he might buy him. He could not very safely shoot him. The report of the pistol might be heard; traces of the murder might be found. In an hour or less people would be hurrying by the spot. He knew that the news of the disaster at Greenlee had not yet reached Rock-fall, but it could not be very long delayed now. Besides, this man seemed to be holding back some plan or fact which enabled him to be thus bold. He made up his mind to change his tactics. He was fully informed of all that had gone on at the village during the night. Before deciding upon

his course he made up his mind to ascertain exactly what this man's position in the case was. He put a question :

"Suppose you had not met me, what would you have done with that letter?"

Retcard had no trustworthy clue to the real meaning of that letter. He had only his guesses and his surmises and his deductions. He had told the truth up to this. Although William Spalding had returned the pistol to his pocket, Retcard did not know but that any moment it might reappear and the desperate man before him might use it. His great object now was to show the other that it would be bad for him to do so. Now was the time to lie, and to lie boldly. He knew nothing whatever of what had occurred at Greenlee in the night.

"Your son knew all about that letter?" asked Retcard.

"Yes."

"Well, I don't. I met your son since I bought the letter. He wanted me to give it back to him. I declined. He offered me money for it——"

"How much?"


"Two-hundred-and-fifty."

"Go on."

"I refused. I said: 'Are you going to do what you're asked?' and he said: 'No, he wasn't.' He seemed to think a long while, and then he said: 'There's more to be got by not doing it than by doing it.'"

"You lie!" yelled old Spalding, springing towards him and pouring out a torrent of oaths.

Retcard felt he had hit the right nail on the head, and that his triumph was now secure. Assuming a perfectly indifferent manner, he said very quietly: "For the past ten minutes, since you threatened to shoot me, I have looked on myself as a dead man. You can shoot me now, I know, if you please. Do so; but what will you gain? Nothing! What can I, a man who, if you are angry with me, can kill me, gain by telling you a lie now? Nothing! If I live I shall halve with him. If I don't, he will have all the plunder. Now, do what you think best."




"I say you lie!" with awful oaths and imprecations on the sitting man and the son.

"Then fire! If you kill me, you do not kill the secret."

The old man was purple with rage. He shook in every limb. The fury of ten demons seemed to possess him. What, his own flesh and blood going to inform against him! Going to take blood-money for a father's life! Ten thousand deaths and endless ruin on that son!

The old man made a prodigious effort and collected himself. This was the supreme moment of his life. His own flesh and blood had turned against him; had entered into a calculation as to the profit to be gained by hanging his own father! Death and destruction to the traitor! No death was good enough for such a miscreant son! If this man before him there—this clerk—were dead at his feet, his son would sell the secret in a few hours, as soon as he was well enough to swear away a father's life! Why should that son ever look upon the light of another day? He himself could not




go back to the village and strangle the man who traded in a father's blood. . . . But the engine of destruction—of his son's destruction—was now on the cliff at Greenlee, and by all the powers of evil this man should be the warrant-officer for his son's destruction! Those men upon the cliff were only waiting for one sign of confirmation to their suspicions, and they would hurl the wretch into the sea, at once avenging an outraged father and making his position secure.

He was quite pale and collected now. All the hot fury was gone, and in its place deadly malice reigned supreme. Then he spoke :

"I have here," pulling out a little leather bag, "five hundred pounds; they were for my son. Will you take them for your letter, and do an errand into the bargain?"

Retcard's eyes sparkled. He had won. He got lightly to his feet and said: "Yes; if I may do it safely."

"Don't be a fool. I could shoot you safely. Take the money and take the letter. Go to Look



out Hill at Greenlee; you will find men there. Show them that letter. Read it out to them, after telling them that it was addressed to young Spalding, and then destroy it. Say you come to give them news of him. Now, go. Say nothing about me. I give you your life and five hundred pounds to do this. If you don't do exactly as I say you will be a dead man in twenty-four hours. If you speak to anyone of this meeting or of me you will be shot. When the men begin to leave the cliff, take my advice and go away. Get off to one of the Channel islands for awhile. Now go."

"All right," said Retcard lightly. "It's an easily earnt five hundred." And to himself: "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, and I hadn't half a one in the bush."


It was now daylight, and as Retcard approached Greenlee the men had already found confirmation of one of Edward Harfield's theories: a portion of the cliff from which the vast mass below had been detached was blackened and smelt of powder—there had been a blast.

CHAPTER VII.

THE WARRANT OF DEATH.

RETCARD did not lose any time that morning. He made his way quickly along the downs through the broadening dawn. It was full daylight when he got in sight of Lookout Hill.

The clerk had done a splendid morning's work, and was in capital spirits. He had made more out of this transaction than he had hoped in the most sanguine moments of the night before. True, he felt he had mixed himself up with an illegality, but then law did not pay so well as this, and he'd leave the country for a while. Besides, he was really ignorant of the nature of the transaction in which he was involved, and he felt almost confident he could prove his innocence.



Here were the men now assembled on the Head. His business with them was short. He noticed that some alteration had taken place in the cliff. That was none of his business. He wished particularly to learn no more of this matter whatever it was. He had only to read this letter to those men without mentioning old Spalding's name, and then get away from the place as quickly as possible.

Most of the men were in a group about fifty yards from the edge of the cliff. A few were on the very verge, apparently looking for something very closely. Among the former was Vaggers. Among the latter, Harfield.

He was glad to see the tramp; that man could confirm his story without compromising him. Retcard knew many of the men by appearance, but only old Tineworth by name.

"Mr. Tineworth," he said, "I have a letter here which I am to read to you. It concerns young Spalding."

At the name of the boat-builder all the men

gathered round in breathless silence; those who were near beckoned those who were afar off to approach. The men looked grimy and haggard in the dull light of the Christmas morning.

"Vaggers," said Retcard, turning to the tramp, "will tell you that he brought this letter yesterday morning from a person he does not know to young Spalding, of Greenlee."


The tramp looked, nodded, and said "Yes."

No one else spoke. The men all drew closer and thrust forward their necks to hear.

He began and read very slowly :

" 'To-night at ten o'clock. I count on your aid. Remember what I gave and what I am prepared to give him and you. Five you've had and five more you shall have, and a thousand for him if you get him to prevent them going out to-night. I don't care how——' "

Here the reader was interrupted by a universal shiver and a low moan which passed through the



men. Retcard looked round in some alarm. The matter seemed more serious than he had imagined.

"Go on," said Tineworth, in a low impressive voice.

Full of vague and dark misgivings the clerk proceeded. The men stood without moving anything but their eyes. There was something horrible in the crowd of frozen men upon that bleak hill in the cold faint light of the Christmas morning.

Retcard resumed his reading in a tone of perturbation.

"Prevent him without buying him and you can have all. Whether you do or not we are safe. Give bearer five shillings.'"

When Retcard finished reading he tore up the paper swiftly, and flung the fragments to the winds. He was anxious to be rid of this document of vague import now that he had pocketed and earned the money.

For an instant all was silent. All eyes were

directed upon old Tineworth, who stood with his chin dropped on his chest and his arms crossed.

Suddenly a shrill uncouth voice cried out ruthfully: "He wouldn't pay me the five shillings, and he tried to kill me with a roller; Spalding did."

For a moment all eyes were turned upon the tramp. Then as of one accord they all came back to the immovable face of the old man. He spoke:

"He did the deed, men. He blew down the cliff on the men to prevent them boarding the strange craft young Harfield saw, and he did it for money. He did cold-blooded murder for money, and he ruined us all. He shut up Greenlee, where all of us and our fathers before us were born, and he did that and murder in cold blood for money—for hire!"

A yell of rage followed with vengeful gestures and glances from those around, and a wild chorus of "Let's serve him out!"

The old man spoke again:

"I say let the law take its course ; but I don't say whether I mean the law of the land or the law of the village."

A louder and shriller yell and a frantic waving of arms in the air, and then a chorus once more : " Let's do for him ! Over the cliff with him ! Let's serve him out ! "

" What ! what are you going to do ? " demanded Retcard aghast.

" Lynch him ! " cried the men with oaths, as they formed into rude order, and began walking with quick firm feet towards the village.

" Stop ! " shouted Retcard, in a voice of authority. " I command you to stop. He can't have done the thing you say."

The men paused a moment stamping their feet impatiently.

Retcard had told a lie to old Spalding to save his own life. He was not bound to sustain that lie now. He recoiled with horror from the idea that anything he had said, any lie he had employed in a dire extremity, should be the means in ever so

slight a way of causing bloodshed. If he could only arrest these violent men for awhile! A thought flashed through his mind. A lie might now arrest the action of these men.

"Look here," he cried, "I was with young Spalding in Rockfall yesterday evening, and he did not leave me so that he could be here at ten, and in proof of what I say look;" he held up a copper tack. "He had a parcel of these, and one fell out and I picked it up."

"You make a mistake, man," said old Tine-worth slowly. "He was here at ten o'clock. He was hurt at the time of the blast. Young Harfield picked up a bright copper nail like that at Barnacle Bay, and we found more here, and they're all bright. So that if your letter was wrong that nail is enough for us. Stand out of the way."

Retcard fell back completely discomfited.

At the moment the decision of lynching Spalding had been arrived at one man was seen to dash forward towards the village at the top of his speed. In the terrible excitement no one

noticed who it was. By setting off at the time he did he avoided the delay caused by Retcard's interruption. He ran, the main body walked. By avoiding the interruption he reached the village fully a quarter of an hour before the others.

When the main body resumed its march Retcard remained behind. His resolution was taken. At any cost he would not allow bloodshed if he could help it. So far he had done nothing illegal, though he might be mixed up in an illegal transaction. But murder! No, no! He'd set off at the top of his speed to Rockfall, give information to the police (there were none at Greenlee), and then make the best of his way out of the country.

With this design in view he set off briskly for Rockfall.

Meanwhile four-score men with rage and revenge in their hearts moved quickly towards the house of Markham Spalding.

When they reached the confines of the village

they halted for conference. They agreed that although young Spalding had murdered his wife's father, the wife ought to be spared the sight of her husband's capture. They decided to send some of the women to induce the young wife on some pretence or other to leave the house.


By the time this had been decided upon it was twenty minutes since the man had run into the village from the Head.

The women came back stating they had found all the doors and windows barred and bolted, and some strange man inside. The man declined to admit them, saying that Spalding was too ill to rise, and should not be disturbed.

"Who's backing the murderer? Death to them both!" were the cries.

With that the men looked around them, and took up whatever weapons or implements were at hand—stones, staves, marlinspikes, rollers, and ropes—and went solemnly and deliberately to the front of Spalding's house.

"We want Markham Spalding, and we must



get him at once!" cried the spokesman, a man of six feet and of prodigious strength.

No answer.

"Bring a spar," ordered the spokesman.

A spar was brought, the mast of a yawl. Six men seized it, and ran with it against the door.

It passed through the door, encountered something hard, bent like a whip, and split across. The men fell heavily to the ground.


The place was fortified and defended. As the men scrambled to their feet they heard voices of people at work within.

It was three-quarters of an hour since the solitary man had entered the village.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SIEGE.

WHEN the man left the group of fishermen on Lookout Head that morning, and set off full speed for the village, he had but one thought in his head. The reading of that letter had roused up anew his angry feelings against young Spalding. Young Spalding, the man who had refused to pay him, and had threatened him as well, was about to be made away with for an awful crime ; he, Vaggers, wished to be in advance of the others. If he got first to the village he could break in upon the injured man, lean over him, and whisper into his ear the terrible doom decreed against him. To do that would be a thousand-fold sweeter revenge than any he had ever hoped to enjoy. He did not



wish to have any active part in the death of the young man ; to stand over the wretch and whisper his fate into his ear was all that he desired. To see the convicted murderer writhe under the terms of his sentence was a revenge too delicious to be risked by any delay. Let him run at the top of his speed and feel his veins full of fire as he stooped over Spalding and told him that his village had decreed his death, and that the tread of the executioners was shaking the thin turf of the downs as they hurried hither to destroy the destroyer, the man who had cheated and threatened him, Vaggers.

The tramp's imagination had carried away his half-witted mind, and when he arrived in the village he was a perfect monomaniac. He dashed into the building-yard and looked round. It was deserted. He did not know where Spalding lived, but assumed that he was still in the house he had seen him fall out of into the blind darkness of the night before. He went to that house and knocked. He would

have preferred that his present business might be transacted under any other roof than this.

A young girl with black hair opened the door.

Vaggers looked at her with an uneasy start. He knew he had seen her face before, but could not remember when or where.

"Is Spalding here?" he asked abruptly.

"He is."

"I must see him at once."

"You can't. He's lying down yet. Missis is sitting with him, and no one is to go upstairs."

Vaggers pushed the door open, drove the girl aside, strode down the short hall, and ascended the stairs. The house consisted of a ground-floor containing three rooms, and a first-floor containing four. All the four upper rooms opened on a small square lobby at the head of the stairs. Three of the four doors were open. As by instinct Vaggers walked to the one closed door, turned the handle, and entered.

On a bed in the dim light lay the form of a man partly dressed. His head was bandaged,

and part of his face covered with a cloth. By the foot of the bed sat a young woman, heavy-eyed and wan with watching.

The woman rose as Vaggers entered, and said wearily: "Are you the doctor? This is my husband, who was hurt." Then, seeing her mistake, she uttered a cry of surprise, and placed her body between the injured man and the intruder.

Vaggers fell back a pace. His brain felt in a whirl. The excitement of the day before and the evening and the night had bereft him of the last faint flicker of judgment. He did not speak for a moment, and when he did his tongue was thick and he stammered.

"Your husband! Is he your husband?"

"Yes."

"And no matter what he did you're going to stand up for him?"

"Yes. What do you want?"

"And you gave me bread when he gave me blows, or wanted to give me blows, only I was too quick."

"I don't know. Yes, I think I remember now, it was yesterday."

"And you gave me cheese?"

"Yes. What do you want now?"

"And beer too. Didn't you give me beer too?"


"Oh yes. But what can I give you now?
The noise is bad for him."

"Is this little much of noise bad for him?"

"Yes."

"Then there's a greater noise at my heels, the noise of all the village men; and a greater noise in front of him, the noise of all the sea; for they are coming to throw him over the cliff for firing a blast down on your father and the five men."


"My God! he never did it! Oh, whoever you are, save my husband! Save him or let them kill me too! I have no one now but him. He never did the thing, I say, I swear! Oh, whoever you are, save him or kill me before they come. Do what you will, but save me from this!"



“Save you! Will it save you if I save him? Then I will save him and you. Ha, ha, ha! They never took any notice of me all night. They never gave me food or drink. Ha, ha, ha! I’ll let them see they have no fool to deal with. I’ll let them see what I am. I have the strength of ten of them now. Let them all come now. I’ll keep them off single-handed. Only just give me half-an-hour. Down, woman, on your knees and ask for half-an-hour. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! I’ll show them what a rare fool I am. Pray hard I say for that half-hour.”

The last extremity of his reason had been overrun by excitement, and he was raving mad, but his madness had taken a turn and was now enlisted in the defence of what he had come to—ruin.

With a sudden wrench he tore off his tattered coat and ragged waistcoat, then his shirt. He wound the cord which served him as braces round his waist, and kicked off his battered and broken shoes.



For an instant he folded his arms across his bare chest and stood motionless.

"Any tools in the house?" he demanded, fixing his blazing eyes in hungry inquiry on the terrified woman.

She pointed down. "The girl will show you where they are."

He sprang to the door and bounded down the stairs.

When the young girl saw him with nothing on him but his trousers, she uttered a cry of terror and fled into the kitchen and bolted the door. He rushed to the front of the house, bolted, barred, and locked the front-door, then the window from the back-room into the yard. He tried to open the kitchen-door, and finding it bolted put his shoulder against it, pushed it from the hinges as though they were brown paper. The man had the strength of a lion.

When the girl saw the door yield and him enter the kitchen, she threw herself on her knees, and with a moan of despair gave herself up for lost.

He took no notice whatever of her, strode to the window, and shut and bolted the shutters in a fury of haste, and with a swift certainty as though he had known the place all his life. When this was done he paused awhile.

"The back is safe," he mutters. "They can't come through the bars of the windows, and the windows are small and high. Bars, too, on the front-window. But the doors, the back and front doors!"

The kitchen was now almost dark. He threw himself on his knees and examined the floor carefully with his hands. Then, springing up, he seized the girl by the shoulder, lifted her to her feet as though she were a shawl, and shook her softly, crying: "The tools! the tools! Where are the tools?"

She raised her hand, pointed, and said: "There."

He let her go. She sank upon the floor. He darted across the kitchen in the direction she had indicated, and plunged into a vast dark coal-hole,

and swiftly emerged with a square bar of iron, inch and a half square, and five feet long.

His eyes had now grown accustomed to the darkness.

Raising this bar perpendicularly aloft, he plunged it into a brick beside the hearthstone, shattering the brick in a thousand pieces and sending fragments of it all round the kitchen. One more downward drive of the bar, and then, throwing all his weight on it, the vast hearthstone, six feet by three feet four inches thick, trembled in its bed, the mortar at the sides cracking, yielding.

Again he flings the bar aloft; again it descends. This time he can raise his end of the stone three inches out of its bed. Seizing a saucepan from beneath a dresser by the fire, he thrusts the handle of the saucepan under the stone and scotches it. He works on with prodigious energy, speed, and strength, until the stone, weighing at least six hundredweight, stands upright in its bed. The stone is as hard as flint, and does not chip beneath the grinding action of the bar.

Vaggers stands a moment with his hand on the stone ; then shouts out to the girl : "Get up," in a voice that causes her to spring to her feet. The terrific energy and strength of the man have cowed the girl into forgetfulness of her own fears.

"Two rollers, at once!" cries Vaggers, as he shakes the ends of the stone loose in its bed.

Silently and quickly she brings a rolling-pin and an old boat-roller.

"No, no ; not that," he cried, as he sees the boat-roller. "Something else. The handle of a pounder or broom. That's like what he wanted to hit me with, and I must not think of that now."

She brings him a pounder. With one blow against the upright stone he smashes off the head and places the handle on the floor, and cants the huge flag over edgeways on the rollers, and pushes the stone out of the kitchen, up the hall, making the young girl relay the rollers as they come out behind. Thus he gets the hearthstone to the hall-door.

The hall is five feet wide ; the door three.

Thrusting one end of the stone against the door he sends the girl back for the bar. She returns, saying she is unable to carry it.

He cries: "Go up to her and tell her she must help if she wants to save the man."

The girl flies up; all fear has left her now. She has caught the contagion from this man, and is eager for action. In a moment the wife descends, pale and trembling, and the two carry him his bar.

Having placed one corner of the stone against one corner of the door with the aid of the two women, he succeeds in laying the stone down flat. This is no easy matter on account of the narrowness of the hall, but at last it is safely accomplished.

Now the great stone has to be hoisted up on end.

"Bring a chair," says he. This madman has the strength of ten and the intelligence of a hundred.

When the chair is brought he prizes up the stone a little. "Put the chair down with its back legs up."

They do so, and little by little he prizes up the stone and they press in the wide wedge made by the chair.

When they have the stone breast high he tries it, and finds that by their united strength they can push it upright.

With a dull heavy sound the stone falls against the hall-door.

Vaggers draws a hard breath like one who, swimming for life, finds a rock and lands on it to rest a moment before risking life once more in the doubtful sea.

"A hatchet!" he cries. The girl brings him one, and with a few powerful blows of it he cuts through the flooring, so that the stone nicks into a cut in the boards just above and supported by a joist. While he is so engaged the women hold the stone upright.

"Is there a yawl's mast in that cellar?"

"Yes ; all kinds of things."

"Fetch me a yawl's mast."

They return quickly with a light spar.

He springs upon the chair and thrusts his iron bar through the ceiling.

"What's above this hall?" he asks.

"The landing."

"Very good. Hold this stone upright now. I'll be back presently." He takes the hatchet with him and is gone.

They hear a few blows overhead and then there is light. In the flooring above he has cut a hole corresponding to the one he had made in the ceiling. Instantly he is down in the hall again. Now he seizes the mast and thrusts it through the opening in the ceiling and runs in the butt of the mast close to the foot of the stone. At the foot of the stone he cuts a hole in the boards and thrusts the butt of the mast into the hole.

The stay now reaches through both floors, and makes a gigantic upright bolt for the hearthstone. Between it and the stone there is a space of two inches. This space he fills up with pillows. Then the front door is secure.

"Did you pray hard for that half-hour?" he asks.

"Yes."

"Well then, pray for another. The back-door is as dangerous as this, and——"

He paused. The voices of women were asking for admission.

"Go away," he cries; and, after repeated denials, they go.

"Now for the back-door," he cries, "and you go and pray for another half-hour. This took us more than half. I must get the hearthstone out of the front-room for the back-door."

"I can't go in there," said the young wife; "*he* is there."

"What? Is it what I saw on the couch?" asks Vaggers.

"Yes."

"Then I will go with the girl, and do you go and ask for half——"

Crash!

The stone and the spar tremble, but do not yield. The attack has begun.


Part III.

AFTER THE DARK.

CHAPTER I.

FROM GREENLEE TO ROCKFALL.

RETCARD'S fear rather than his conscience was aroused, and, as he flew at the highest speed his short legs and shorter wind would allow him, he tried to clear up his position in the terrible things surrounding him. In the background of the past was the awful crime of the night before. These men were no doubt right. The cliff had been blown down on the revenue boat, and the crew of the boat had been sacrificed to some hideous scheme of fraud.



A good deal of what had been only conjecture as to the meaning of that mysterious letter was now cleared up, and stood forth in all its ghastly reality. Spalding the elder was beyond all doubt one of the leading spirits in a great smuggling venture, and the blowing down of that cliff was part of the nefarious plan. "A thousand for him if you get him to prevent them going out to-night," was no doubt the offer of a bribe for Captain Colville, on the condition that he prevented the coast-guard boat putting to sea that night. It was also clear that Colville had not been bought, since he had not only failed to prevent the men leaving the shore, but had himself gone with them, and perished in the dreadful affair.

So far, at least, one point was pretty clear to Retcard: Young Spalding had never mentioned the bribe of a thousand pounds to Colville, for, had he done so and the other declined it and determined to do his duty, the magnitude of the bribe would have put the captain on the alert, would have prepared him for a smuggling operation of

great dimensions, and he would never have risked his men's lives and his own in that boat. He would have taken ample precautions, not only against surprise, but to insure the capture of the whole band. While Retcard paused a moment on the cliff before setting out for Rockfall, he had gathered from disjointed sentences all the facts known to the fishermen.


Thus he concluded that young Spalding had not bribed his father-in-law, had not even made an attempt to do so.

This deduction did not, however, help him far forward in the solution of the difficulty concerning the full meaning of the note. For young Spalding had left him the night before with a half-promise that he would come back and buy that note of him for two-hundred-and-fifty pounds, and young Spalding had not done so. Now the boat-builder had read the note, and knew full well the tragic importance of it; knew that in the face of the facts of last night that note would not only compromise him, but might hang him. Yet, wonderful, incre-

dible to relate, Markham had not come back, and the tragedy had been played out to its bloody end. Not only that, but young Spalding had been absolutely at the scene of the crime the very moment the crime was committed. The people of the village were so sure he had done the abominable deed that they were now about to lynch the young boat-builder.

On, on, at top of speed, on!

Then what did these words in the letter mean? "Whether you do or not we are safe." This was the most momentous question of all. Who were the "we," and what condition was indicated as assured when old Spalding declared that with or without the nullification of Colville's action they were safe? Of course the fact of Colville being at Greenlee on that night was pure accident. What old Spalding wanted was merely that by some means or other Colville should prevent his men noticing or seeing anything that night. That night being Christmas Eve, nothing would have been easier than for the captain in a good-humoured




way to make the men a present of a couple of quarts of rum and tell them to enjoy themselves, and that he or someone else for him would keep the look-out. Not only had a good look-out been kept, but the captain had himself accompanied them.

The whole letter seemed written in the tone of one who was not sure of obtaining the assistance he demanded. It was more like a final threat than a final order in a concerted movement. Ah! perhaps there might lie the key.

Then Retcard, as he turned across the dreary downs, tried to unravel the letter by the clue supplied in his own interview with old Spalding that morning. How did that interview bear on the supposition that the letter from father to son was a threat and not an instruction? He, Retcard, had invented the idea that young Spalding was not only unwilling to co-operate with his father, but entertained the notion of betraying the secret. The mere hint of this had overwhelmed the old man with fury, which, upon Retcard's insistence upon the truth of his state-

ment, had turned into ungovernable rage against his son. Clearly this went to show that old Spalding's confidence in his son was not illimitable; was, indeed, so very weak as to be at the mercy of a stranger's word. When he, Retcard, said to William Spalding that Markham had contemplated betraying him, the old man's whole nature turned to fury and a desire for vengeance.

Old Spalding no doubt knew of all that had occurred at and near Greenlee during the past twenty-four hours—he was sure to have kept the neighbourhood well watched. He must have heard that his son had been wounded, that the villagers suspected the young man of blowing down the cliff, and that they had resolved to take the law into their own hands should they be able to bring the crime home to the young man; and in the face of all this William Spalding had hired him, Retcard, to bring that note to Greenlee and read it aloud to the infuriated men, had hired him to do this thing with a sum of no less than five hundred pounds!



Ugh! There was a smell of murder about this old man's plot against his son; and as he (Retcard) passed Barnacle Bay he thrust his fingers inside his collar, an imaginary hempen noose tickled his neck, and the words of a chaplain and the shuffle of a hangman's feet were in his ears.

He put all his energy into his legs, and redoubled his speed. His thoughts went on.

It was now evident that old Spalding's intention in giving that note and that mission to him for Lookout Head was to destroy his son. But—and this was the question which terrified Retcard most of all, and which he had been evading and postponing to the uttermost limits of place and time in the investigation, which went on without his invitation, or even consent, in his own mind—if the blowing down of the cliff had been what old Spalding had appointed his son to do, and if the cliff had been blown down on the innocent victims, why did old Spalding wish the infuriated men of Greenlee to make away with his son?

Why?



When Retcard's mind paused the second time before this disquieting question, he felt the hempen noose tighten around his own neck, he heard the sougling of the voices of the crowd, the murmured words of the chaplain in his ears, and the shuffle of the hangman's stealthy feet, as the last stepped into that portion of the grating of the gallows which did not swing, when the spring from the bolt lay at the hangman's muffled feet.


Then slowly, and with an awakening wonder of awe, the answer trickled into his mind :

"Young Spalding had nothing to do with the blowing down of the cliff, but, being in the secret of the old smuggler, the father wished it to seem that Markham did the crime, so that the people of the village might rise and slay the young man before any calm inquiry or legal examination could take place. Thus Markham Spalding would have no opportunity of betraying the secret."

Now came to him (Retcard) the distressing thought that the idea of the young boat-builder betraying the smugglers had no existence save

in his own head. Thus young Spalding was about to be lynched at Greenlee for a crime he had not committed, and he (Retcard), by the word of his father, had helped forward the village folk to lynch him because he had not done the deed. Was ever complication so involved and so perverse?

If they lynched the man it would subsequently appear that he (Retcard) brought that letter and read it to the fishermen, thereby adding the last word in the sentence of the man's murder. Then the tramp Vaggers knew the history of that letter, and would be made to tell that history in court. If the fact of the meeting that morning came to light, nothing would clear him of the gallows. Nothing would convince any jury that he had not been deep in the schemes of the smugglers from the first. No one would know that old Spalding had threatened his (Retcard's) life, and that he (Retcard) was ignorant of all that had happened on the coast, and particularly at Greenlee, during the night. It would be proved against him that he had been out of a situation ; that he had saved no



money ; and yet that, after the event, he had been found with money on him. Would they lynch him too ?

Old Spalding had advised him to fly the country after reading the document to the people ; to fly and never mention his name in connection with that morning's encounter. Old Spalding had recommended him to seek one of the Channel islands.

The Channel islands ! Yes, indeed, and be caught to-morrow, and be hanged the day after !

No ; he would go straight to the police-office, make a plain straightforward statement of all he knew in connection with the matter, and beg of the police to send at once to Greenlee, or more murder would be done—perhaps already it had been done !

In God's name speed !

At last the white walls of Rockfall appeared below. In ten minutes more Retcard had reached the police-station, and, as fast as his quickened breath would allow him, was fully detailing the history of the night to the head-constable.

CHAPTER II.

WILLIAM SPALDING AT BAY.

WHEN William Spalding released Retscard that Christmas morning he turned towards his house on the slope of the Eastern Down above Rockfall and walked rapidly.

His mind was in dire conflict. The discovery of the past hour had not only completely disturbed all his calculations, but threatened to ruin all his plans. Up to that all had prospered with him, and things might yet come right even notwithstanding Harfield's unfortunate discovery of the smack and the news of it brought by him to the village. True the villagers had found out that there had been a blast, and they had connected

the blast with the appearance of the dandy smack in Barnacle Bay.

But then who knew the great secret? No one. Who knew the heart's core of the secret? No one. They might come and search Barnacle Bay, and they would find no one. They might come and explore the Black Bell Cave, and if luck were not outrageously against him they would find nothing. It was an infernal fact in the chances against him that Harfield should at one and the same moment have seen the smack and the flame of the blast. No one, not the wisest, could have counted on such a chance as that young scoundrel deserter being on the cliffs at such an hour on the night of Christmas Eve. But as things were now all was in danger; all was well nigh lost.

His son knew all but one thing, could betray everything but that. Unfortunately for the sole chance of success still remaining his son could, if he would, destroy that chance. In the interview with his son, now only a few weeks ago, he had

whispered into his son's ear all the main features connected with landing the tobacco save one. That one he had withheld as calculated to keep his son back. When he wrote the last sentence but one in that unlucky letter he had this secret in view. "Whether you do or not we are safe," was written with that unrevealed expedient in his mind. Now all had been done that could be done to secure safety, and they were far from safe; they were in the midst of fierce danger, and his life depended on the course events took in a few hours.

All his long-headed precautions, all his long-matured plans, might be defeated by the young apprentice and—by the perfidy of his son. But if Retcard only came upon those men and read that letter to them, saying it had been addressed to that perfidious son the day before, all the water in the sea out there would not wash the traitor son white in their eyes, all the rocks and cliffs of the shore would not be an effectual barrier between him and their rage.

The cliffs and the sea! The cliffs had been his home for a little while, but the sea had been the home of his youth, the companion and friend of his manhood. This old friend of his had often seemed to threaten, overwhelm him, and many a close encounter had he with the sea and the wind. Many a dark and doleful night had he hung upon the perilous edge of a white-fringed lee shore. Many and many a time had he been obliged to weather out a gale, although under his lee lay the smooth waters of a hill-girdled harbour and the safety of good holding anchorage, and yet he durst not run in ; because his papers were irregular, because neither his position nor his cargo was compatible with his papers ; because, in short, he was a smuggler, with a contraband freight.

The sea had been against him then, but now it appeared as though the land had risen up against him. His son—the only son he had on earth, the only relative to whom he could look—had not only refused to aid him in this great

adventure, but had absolutely declared his intention of giving him up, of betraying him into the hands of the law. Very well. He was no chicken-hearted fool. He had been too long in the world not to know that all men do all the things that they do for money. He had saved money by cheating his own Government. Then he retired, and foreign Governments had borrowed his money and cheated him of it. Now he had made this one scheme since he came to live on shore. This venture with the *Vigil of the Moon* was his great work. He had, himself, after his retirement from the business of smuggling, kept up relations with his old Jersey friends. He had explored the coast assiduously until he had made his great discovery, the upper cave in the Black Bell Cave, the cave above the great Bell itself. It was upon the discovery of this cave that he founded all the scheme which had been bit by bit put together, and brought to an issue the evening before. He had been delighted when he heard that his son had fallen in love with

the coastguard captain's pretty daughter. It would be well to have a friend in that quarter. Then he had insisted upon Markham starting business in Greenlee, that he might have his son at the coastguard station most important to him, and his son's father-in-law at the other. Then further detail was settled in his mind ; but as he had enough money to live upon, he always kept his great scheme in reserve, and had never thought of seeking to put it in operation until he had lost all, or nearly all, his savings in a foreign Government loan. Then, having communicated with his old Jersey friends, he assured them that there was not the shadow of the chance of failure, and that he would be personally responsible to them for the success of the plan ; but that the vessel should be lost in running the cargo he had at last agreed, and named the *Vigil of the Moon*, one-hundred-and-fifty-six tons dead weight, as the vessel to run the tobacco, and be subsequently sacrificed.

Had all his splendid scheme been sacrificed by

a cowardly son? Was he to be ruined? Was his reputation with those whose oracle he had been for thirty years to be destroyed by the perfidy of an only son? Perish the thought, and perish the son!

Ay, perish the thought, and perish the son; but should he, William Spalding, perish also? That was the question he had to face, and it was now past eight o'clock.

What was the position? In what condition did he find himself here and now?

He paused awhile, looked around, and meditated profoundly. His thoughts ran on.

Before eleven o'clock last night the *Vigil of the Moon* was disposed of according to his design.

By six o'clock that morning all had been done. The other vessel had stood in close under the shore and carried off all the men but one—but one and his two spies, who were not in the secret at all. All but one, and he, Tom Reynolds, had not turned up. It would be a good job if he had been killed. Everything was now quiet there

below, ready for inspection, except that boat. The boat was made fast at the bottom of the precipitous path that led from the downs to Barnacle Bay. A rope hung out of the upper cave into the lower one, and although it was hidden from view in the clammy slippery seaweed of the Black Bell, still some fiend of mischance might betray the rope to the revenue folk and the police from Rockfall when they came, as no doubt they would, to examine the bay and the cave.

He had taken unusual care to conceal that opening in the roof of the lower cave, and now he might defy anyone who did not know of it to find it. If Markham should not be lynched, and should divulge the secret of that upper cave—oh, d—n Markham! There was no use in calculating that chance; it was beyond his power of governing or knowing. Taking all things into account, what had he best do?

He was now almost in sight of his own house; should he go in or turn back, get down that cliff?


Yes, yes. What had he been thinking of?



That was of course the best thing to do. What folly had tempted him to lose precious time in going from the Bay towards Rockfall? Back at once to the Bay. Then he should go down the cliff, crawl into the boat, and draw her along by the side of the bay—no oars, oars made a noise, and he must be silent as a cat, and secret as night, for now his hands were red—and steal into the cave. Then he should be safe.

Safe from all! Safe from perfidious son and all the hell-hounds which that son could put on a hunted father's track!

He turned, and with hasty step and flashing eyes set off towards Rockfall. As he went the perspiration started out on his face, the veins in his hands swelled, the flesh at his temples reddened until it became crimson. There was the energy of twenty-five in his stride, and the fury of a roused giant in his gait. His quick fierce breath came through his red dilated nostrils and floated behind him on the damp air like a pair of bended plumes.




This man now felt himself at bay. Daring and unscrupulous as had been the acts of his seafaring life, he had never until now had the blood of murder on his hands. Murder, not the result of any heat or passion ; murder, not sprung from any provocation given or injury received, but murder as coolly and deliberately planned as though human lives were no more in the road that led him to his grave than daisies beneath the feet in a meadow field.

At last he reached the top of the path leading to the waters of Barnacle Bay, and with firm hands and feet began the perilous descent.

With fingers that clenched like iron hooks and feet that seemed to dig into the adamantine face of the cliff, he went down as surely and as safely as though steps had been cut and a hand-rail fixed for him.

But although there was no suggestion of danger in his mind the feat took time, and half-an-hour elapsed before he found himself standing on the



little ledge that marked the high-water limit of the path.


At the moment that he drew the small skiff to him and placed his foot aboard, Retcard passed the Bay a few hundred yards from the cliff on his way to Rockfall for succour.

CHAPTER III.

“PRESENT!”

AS soon as Retcard found himself in Rockfall he lost not a moment in carrying out his plan. He went straight to the police-station, where he was well known, and having easily procured a private interview with the head-constable, who was specially summoned from his home, laid all the facts of the case before that functionary, and furthermore, to remove any doubt there might be about his good faith and sincerity, threw down the five hundred pounds in confirmation of his story.

The head-constable was a man of judgment and decision. He took the money, counted it,



locked it up, and, having called in a constable, gave Retcard in charge of him, saying: "Mr. Retcard has given himself up as an accessory after the fact in a smuggling transaction attempted on this coast last night, in which lives were lost. You will detain him here until I return. He can have any refreshment he wants, and may sit here in my room, but is not to leave this place. You understand?" Here the head-constable whispered something to the constable.

"Yes, sir."

The head-constable then turned to Retcard, and said: "This may seem an extreme measure considering your coming of your own free will, but you will not regret it if all you say is true."

"Nothing could suit me better," answered Retcard, sinking with a sigh of relief into a chair. "I've had a long walk, and am blown, and tired, and hungry. But for heaven's sake be quick, or they'll lynch him."

The head-constable left the room with calm manner and slow step. In less than half-an-hour

he walked back, and sat down at the fire with Retcard.

In a little time the head-constable was summoned. He left the office, returned slowly, and took up his old position.

Retcard looked at him in amazement.

The other noticed the look of surprise on the clerk's face, and said: "You are surprised to see me return, and you are naturally disappointed that it was not your breakfast?"

"I am indeed surprised and disappointed to see you back, but I am not thinking of my breakfast."

"Why then are you surprised to see me back?"

"Why!" shouted Retcard, starting to his feet, seizing his hat, and rushing to the door.

The constable placed himself between the door and the little clerk, and said politely: "You cannot go, sir."

"Confound it!" cried the little man impatiently; "will you sit there, head-constable, while they are murdering that unfortunate man!" Retcard having thrown down the cards he held

two hours ago, feared that this cool and matter-of-fact treatment of his great intelligence was a poor requital for his disinterested heroism.

The head-constable smiled placidly, bruised a piece of spluttering coal with his toe, and answered very slowly, very quietly : " I am greatly afraid that if it is that young man's fate to be murdered by those men I shall be compelled to sit here while they are murdering him."


" Well then, you cold-blooded monster, if you are going to sit there doing nothing I don't intend following your example."

" You shall follow my example," said the head-constable, with as little trace of interest or excitement as though he were repeating the multiplication table in bed to put himself to sleep.

" But, sir," cried the little man hotly, " you must be aware that your detention of me here under the circumstances is illegal."

" Well, I don't mind going so far as to admit it is irregular."

" Irregular, sir ; irregular ! I know the law, sir,



and it is illegal, a false imprisonment. Where is my statement made by me, read over to me, and signed by me? Where, in fact, sir, is my oral statement that I came to give myself up as an accomplice after the fact? I never said anything of the kind; and, moreover, I never intended doing anything of the kind."

"It was only my joke," said the head-constable with a humble smile, "only my joke. You can take a joke, Mr. Retcard, from an old friend. Why, you and I have been friends time out of mind."

"Well then, sir, as that was your little joke about the giving myself up and my confession, I suppose it is another part of your little joke to pretend that I am detained here at present? Eh?" The clerk was now purple with indignation and rage.

"You may go now, Farny," said the head-constable to the man at the door. Then turning to Retcard, who walked up and down the room in fierce excitement, he said: "Retcard, keep quiet. You know me pretty well now, and you know I

am no fool. You know that old Spalding threatened to do for you if you mentioned your interview with him to anyone. Now if he saw you coming from this office, or if any of his pals saw you, they might grow nasty and suspicious, and knock your brains out ; and I want to keep you safe and sound here, for when you come into your money maybe you'll remember the man whose little joke helped you to live to enjoy it."

"Into what money?" cried Retcard, pausing in his walk and looking in bewilderment; "I know very well I shall never put a finger on that five hundred again."

"Bah! Five hundred!" cried the head-constable contemptuously; "what's five hundred compared to what's coming to you?"

"Why what on earth is coming to me?"

"The reward for informing on a smuggler, the share in the value of the cargo or duty; don't be too simple, Retcard."

"Confound me, but I never thought of that!" cried the clerk, as he dropped into a chair com-

pletely overcome by the splendid vision these words opened up to him. Then, after awhile, he asked: "But have you done anything?"

"All that need be done. Eight mounted men are now galloping across the downs to Greenlee, and two boat-loads of armed men are now pulling to Barnacle Bay, ten men are gone on foot across the downs, and I have made all ready for getting the aid of the military should I want them."

The statements reconciled Retcard to the head-constable's room and inaction. He sat there gazing into the fire, and indulging his fervid imagination in dreams of the vast sum he should come into for informing about the smuggling, and trying to decide what he should do with this virtuously acquired wealth.

Meanwhile, as the head-constable had said, a party of eight mounted men and ten on foot had started over the downs for Greenlee, and two boats carrying armed coastguards were swiftly approaching Barnacle Bay under the steep cliffs.

The horsemen had received no orders but to



make all the haste they could to Greenlee and prevent violence there. The men on foot had been instructed to keep as close as possible to the edges of the cliffs, leave two men at Barnacle Bay, and push on with the rest to Greenlee, taking note of anything they might see or that might arise on the way.

The horsemen galloped ; the footmen went at "quick march."

The footmen, as directed, kept close to the edge of the cliff. It was no part of their duty to search the house of old Spalding ; that duty devolved on others. So the ten men kept on.

When they arrived at Barnacle Bay they examined the ground carefully, for although there was nothing round about behind which an enemy could lurk, it was well to take all reasonable precautions.

No one now anticipated resistance or attack from the smugglers. All believed that the cargo had been successfully landed ; and as the catastrophe occurred twelve hours ago there had been

not only time to land the cargo, but to make all snug as well.

The two men posted at Barnacle Bay were merely to prevent anyone ascending by that way. One man as long as he lived could have prevented the whole army of Xerxes from coming up that path.

When the two men had been posted the eight continued their march. They found nothing to challenge attention until they had got more than half the way between the Bay and Lookout Head.

The coastguard sergeant led the way. His eyes were fixed ahead. He had told those who came after him to keep a bright look-out right and left.

The carbines were loaded and shouldered, and the men strode on in perfect silence.

The sergeant marched two paces in advance; the man had a square determined-looking face. He had lost a brother by the crime of last night, and there was an expression of dull heavy determination in his face that indicated he would endure no

levity among the men, and would be only glad of a chance of using his authority to the utmost should he meet resistance from any band connected with the appalling outrage.

Suddenly, like blows struck against the cliff, came the words of command :

“Halt! Ground arms! Ready!”


All eyes were swiftly directed in front. The men drew up, dropped their carbines, and then raising them to their knees, there came through the stillness the clatter of the locks as they cocked their pieces.

“No man to fire until he gets orders,” said the sergeant without turning his head, and in a lower voice than the loud swift words of command.

Then once more came the strong-driven word of command :

“Line! Form! Present!”

The carbines, all but the sergeant's, were raised and focussed upon one point right ahead and close to the edge of the cliff.



CHAPTER IV.

"COMING HOME."

THE two boats from Rockfall for Barnacle Bay kept close in-shore. Rowing round coast so close in-shore after all the bad weather was not very pleasant, for the boats had to pull through the trough and along the crest of the sea. The leading and larger boat contained fourteen men, and pulled six oars; the second and smaller boat contained ten men and the lieutenant in charge. She pulled four oars. The leading boat could run away from the second, being long and built for speed; whereas the latter was short, and built for bad weather. But it was essential that the two should keep together.

In one way the fact that it was Christmas Day was lucky ; on perhaps no other day of the year could so large a force of coastguards be mustered in Rockfall. The men had come in on leave from outlying stations to the westward, and upon being informed of the occurrences of the night before, and of the nature of the services demanded of their comrades on duty, they had to a man volunteered for the boats.

When William Spalding had drawn the boat toward him at the bottom of the precipitous path at Barnacle Bay, he stepped in firmly, and then turned his flushed determined face upward to the cliffs.

No one above him. His daring eyes encountered nothing but the dark wet sides of the threatening and oppressive rocks. The cliffs were slimy and cold and deadly-looking, as though they had turned their faces away finally from man and would aid man no more.

Beneath Spalding's feet rose and fell, in soft dull pulses, the gray waters of the deep sluggish

Bay. He was familiar with the sound of the sea in all its moods. He had no poetic or imaginative feeling about the sea, but like all sailors he was superstitious, and in the heart of nearly all superstition is the crudest form of poetry—the poetry of the Fears.

There were for him many features of novelty in the situation. He had often been in positions of great peril before, but never quite so alone; and besides, it was now some years since he had had any direct connection with the desperate trade of smuggling. Although he had passed middle age he was still hale and hearty, and counted upon living many a long year yet after he had secured the great prize out there and got his share of it. Of course it would be a little while before they could move that cargo. Confound it, though! he was counting as though his perfidious son had not informed against him.

But then, who could tell?—perhaps they had lynched the traitor before he had come to his senses or could speak.


He looked up again at the cliffs standing dark above him and ignoring him. Then seizing the rocks with his hands he began slowly and cautiously pushing the boat in the direction of the cave.

That feeling of loneliness persisted, and would not be driven away. The feeling was new to him, and he could now ill endure new feelings of a depressing or saddening character.

What could have happened to the missing man, Reynolds? Ay, maybe he was dead with the rest.

A slight shudder went through him at the thought—the Rest. Often as he had violated the laws of God and man before, up to this he had been clear of the stain of bloodshed. But as day by day the great scheme matured in his mind the enormity of the crime became lost in the splendour of the plan and the munificent reward that waited upon its success.


Suddenly he ceased to push the boat along by the shore, dropped on his knees and gazed



earnestly into the water. He rose cautiously after awhile, and looked around and upward, and whispered as though he were taking the solitude into his confidence, and trying to form an alliance with earth and air against water. "I thought I saw waving in the water by the rocks the arm of a man—the arm of a man who wanted help; and when I looked closer the arm was gone—gone in among the swaying seaweeds that hold the places where dying men cling their last. One of *those* men could not have drifted here since. No, no; none of them could wave an arm now; they are stiff in death."

He once more applied himself to getting the boat along by the rocks. His teeth were set, and his face now pale and wrinkled. Still his arms were strong and his gripe sure, and the boat moved quickly towards the mouth of the cave.


Seizing a rock at the entrance, he swung the boat's bow inward, and then with one powerful push the little craft shot out of the light into the obscurity of the vault.



As soon as the boat was concealed by the cave, William Spalding sat down to rest and think. There was now no hurry. Even if they did come in pursuit of him he should hear the oars, and would have plenty of time for escape into the upper cave before they could enter the lower one.

His plan of escape was very complete, and all the means were at hand and in order.

In the first place, that morning early, as soon as all the men had gone and he found himself alone, he had taken a grappling-iron in the upper cave, and to this fixed seven fathom of inch-rope. Having placed the grappling-iron in the floor of the cave on a bed of smooth rock, with two of its flukes against a ledge of rock, and a bale of tobacco on it to keep it steady, he had thrown the other end of the rope down the throat of the cave into the cave below. Owing to the shape of the great Black Bell Rock the line lay flat on its surface the whole way down, and owing to the seaweed and mosses clinging to the Bell the rope would lie



perfectly concealed from any ordinary torch or lamp-light examination likely to be made in the cave. When hoisting the goods into the upper cave he had had this scheme of concealment in view, and had been careful to place three thicknesses of tarpaulin and a sail spread over that portion of the surface of the Bell likely to be rubbed by the men or the ascending bales.


The *Vigil of the Moon* had had two boats, one of which had been sunk with a kedge-anchor made fast to the thwarts; in the other boat he now sat. To the bottom of that boat he had tacked down with strips of sailcloth the iron anchor-stock of the *Vigil of the Moon's* bower-anchor. There was one oar in the boat he sat in, and now he was in the act of lashing that oar with two pieces of spunyarn to the thwarts of the boat.

Seen in full light the rocks of the cave were a ruddy brown. Before descending from the upper cave on that morning he had placed by the shaft a piece of ruddy-brown sail—tanned

sail; and as he descended he drew this tanned sail across the head of the shaft, so that the light of a bull's-eye lantern could show no trace whatever of the opening, could discover no difference between that piece of sailcloth and the rocks around.

When he first drew upon the rope as he was about to descend, he noticed one thing with surprise—the grappling-iron did not seem to have come fully home to the ledge, for it sprang with him six inches before it held firm. He thought that in putting on the bale of tobacco he must have pushed back the grappling. However, when the iron did come to it held splendidly, and as he descended he congratulated himself upon the firmness and steadiness of the rope.

His plan of escape and concealment was ingenious but simple. As soon as he was a little rested he should find that rope, hold on by it, pull the cork out of the bottom of the boat, put the cork in his teeth that it might



not be found floating about to tell tales—he had been very careful to have anything else that might be floating about picked up—and, just as the boat was about to sink, put his feet against the side of the Bell and clamber up into the cave above. Then he should draw up the line, replace the covering at the top of the shaft, and bid defiance to discovery—always excepting Markham betrayed him. Even in case his son turned traitor he could stand a long siege. He had plenty of provisions and arms in the upper cave, and as long as he could raise a hand to strike or move a finger to pull a trigger, no one could come up that shaft against his will.

In case his hiding-place was not discovered he should remain there until the first fury of pursuit was over and then get off inland. The removal of the cargo from that cave presented great difficulties under the most favourable circumstances, but it was time enough to think of overcoming those by-and-by. When he wanted

to leave the cave nothing was easier than to drop a grappling-iron into the sunken boat, raise her to the surface, and bale her out.

Still he sat in that boat, resting his chin in his palm and his elbow on his knee. The tide was still rising and there was plenty of time. It was not yet high water, and he could reach the rope from the boat at quarter ebb.

There was a fascination in thus, as it were, daring capture. There was the boat all ready for scuttling, here was the line on the rock all ready for his escape. There was no necessity for him to anticipate matters. He'd wait and rest awhile.

It was impossible to see anything clearly in the green gloom of the cave. The low arch giving entrance to it was a gleaming patch of light. When the eyes were turned even for a moment on it and then cast around the cave, nothing whatever could be even dimly discerned. So he kept his back to the light to prevent his eyes being dazzled. He was on the inner side of the Bell, and under the flat bottom of the huge pendent rock a feeble gleam


of sickly light lay on the stagnant water of the cave, and threw up out of the darkness the side of the boat in which he sat.

It was impossible to see anything in the cave distinctly, but it was possible to think and to hear. He could not see what the long seaweeds were doing in the darkness of the shrouded waters that whispered to the obscure sides of the cave. Were those long winding arms of seaweed clasped around anything unusual, anything which had floated there from the narrow strait at Greenlee?

Absurd!

And yet what strange noises the water was making in that corner over there! What unaccountable breathings and sighings the water made in that corner over there, the deepest and darkest corner of all!

Confound these foolish fancies! He was getting as fearful as a girl in his age. Confound the water and the whisperings of it. Why should he not go up into the cave and lie down and sleep? He needed sleep more than childish



fancies. Ay, it would be best to go aloft and lie down.

He takes the cork out of the bottom and puts the cork carefully in his mouth. He can feel the water beat against his boots ; he can hear the rush of the water in through the hole in the bottom.

The boat is only a punt, and in five to eight minutes she will fill and sink.

He pushes the stern of the boat in under the Bell, so that he may in scaling the Bell have the firmest bearing part of the boat, the midship, for his feet.

He seizes the rope, and chuckles to himself at the notion of anyone trying to mount that slimy, slippery surface without the aid of a rope.

He thrusts his hand down into the water in the boat and satisfies himself that the anchor-stock retains its position. All right. The anchor-stock is quite secure, and she will sink down like a plummet into the three fathoms of water beneath him in less than two minutes.

The water is now halfway up his calf, and the

boat begins to set heavily forward as the water deepens in her bow. He shifts a little aft to trim her.

He seizes the line and holds it steadily in his hand. It is so pleasant to feel that reassuring rope, the rope by which he is to gain safety.


His hand embraces the line affectionately, and a smile of triumph steals slowly and grimly over his face.

One minute more and the boat will be full enough, and she will go down and he will clamber up and laugh at them all. Laugh at them all, for if they do find out the upper cave and try to smoke him out or starve him out, there is plenty of gunpowder up there to make worse murder than Lookout Head saw last night.

The boat now begins to rock heavily at his least motion. It is time to be going.

He runs his hand up the line as far as his arm will reach, laughs softly to himself, and then leans slowly and deliberately on the rope.

He hears the boat suck up out of the water



as she is relieved of some of his weight. He hears the boat suck as he pulls, but although his hand has not slipped his hand is on a level with his mouth and his feet are still on the gunwale of the boat!

Heavens and earth, what is this?

Hastily he stretches up both his arms high as he can and seizes the rope. Again he draws, again he hears the boat suck up as the weight is reduced, again his hands come down, this time to his breast, and still his feet are on the gunwale of the boat!

Madness, what is this! Can the men who mutter in the water over there, the darkest night of water over there, the dead men whose bodies he slew, whose voices he heard awhile ago, have crept across under the stealthy water and caught him by the feet, glued his feet to the gunwale of the sinking boat?

With a low moan he steps down off the gunwale of the boat on her skin amidships; as he does

so his face comes on a level with the bottom of the Black Bell. His face is to the light, and between him and the light at the mouth of the cave he sees a thin dark line close to his eyes!

His mouth opens, the cork he has held in it drops overboard. He knows what has happened, the grappling-iron in the cave above has jumped the ledge and is coming home; the line will bear no weight. It is impossible for him to ascend the Bell, and in less than half a minute the boat under him will go down.

"The cork," he cries, "the cork! What have I done with the cork?"

Then he remembers that he had put it in his mouth.

"The cork is gone! The boat is going down. The grappling is coming home!"

For a few seconds he dabbles about in the water vainly searching for the cork, then abandons all hope of recovering it.

"The grappling is coming home—and to what

kind of a home am I going!" he thinks in his anguish and terror.

Then a thought strikes him, and with speed of despair he grasps at the one hope. Is it too late to plug the hole with his thumb?



CHAPTER V.

THE RESCUE.

THAT memorable Christmas morning when the low weak light began to steal over the downs between Greenlee and Barnacle Bay, no object broke the green monotony of the downs a hundred yards from the edge of the cliffs. About half-a-mile from Lookout Head, on the way to Barnacle Bay and about fifty yards from the brow of the cliff, the downs descended a little towards the sea, lost their flat regularity, and became broken up into a number of small mounds and hollows. The mounds in no instance reached higher than a man's knee. The thin skin of turf was here nowhere broken. Owing to the depression towards the sea, a man standing upon the

brink of the cliff would be invisible to anyone crossing the downs a hundred yards inland.


As the light grew less feeble it revealed, lying among these mounds, the form of a man. Later, it showed that he lay with his face to the ground facing Barnacle Bay ; that he lay partly in the hollow between two of the mounds, and that his head rested on his left arm, which was supported in turn by the top of one of the hillocks.

Was the man asleep ? Something in his attitude gave the idea that he was not asleep, or that if he were asleep the sleep was of a peculiarly sound character. Closer examination revealed facts which almost conclusively proved he could not be asleep. Although his pilot-cloth overcoat was strong looking, and seemed to have been but little worn, the right sleeve hung in ribbons around the right arm, the right side of the coat was torn off, he had no hat, and his right arm was so shockingly mutilated that even a surgeon of long experience and much practice could **not** look at it without a shudder.

Was the man dead? That was hard to answer for although no breeze blew, one could not be sure at a little distance whether the air or the muscles moved the torn ends of the coat at the right side. There was no other motion for hours.

When the sergeant in command of the coast-guards who set out that morning from Rockfall by the edge of the cliffs saw this figure lying in front, he halted his men, formed them into line, and gave the command "Present!" in the belief that the prostrate man was about to fire. The injured man was several hundred yards off at the time the sergeant made him out. The carbines carried by his men would not be much use at such a distance, whereas a musket might be employed with advantage, and this man might have a musket. Caution was necessary. There might be other men behind the one crouching in front; in fact, a numerous band.

After awhile, observing the man in front did not stir, he grounded arms and despatched two men on the left flank. These could see if there



were any others behind, and they would divert the attention. When this disposition was made, all advanced towards the prostrate form. In time they came up to the hurt man, found he was not dead, but insensible ; and the sergeant, having left two men in charge of him, went on with what remained of his force to Greenlee, where he arrived about an hour after the mounted men had ridden in.

From the sergeant in command of the mounted men, the sergeant of coastguards learned the condition of the village when the former arrived, and what had occurred since :

“Half-an-hour after the news got to Rockfall we were in the saddle, and in little more than half an hour more (we galloped most of the way) we were in sight of Lookout Head. There was not a moment to be lost ; we were not a minute too soon.


“Just as we could see the Head a crowd of men were coming up from the village. They had a prisoner, and we knew what to expect and who

he was. We galloped right to the Head, and drew up in front of the crowd.

"When they saw us they halted and held a consultation ; so, leaving my men on the Head, I rode up to the crowd.

"I saw at once that the spirit of the crowd was not all the one way. Having got hold of their man, and finding him weak and wounded, some of them began to grow faint-hearted about the lynching. It appears that after more than an hour's attack on his house, they had broken in, found his wife, a little girl, a half-witted man, and young Spalding. Bad as young Spalding was from a cut, he had spoken to them from the window before they got in ; and although none of them would take his word for his innocence, some of them were not so very sure about lynching the man. Old Tineworth, who is greatly looked up to in the village, was dead against it, although he had been in favour of it at one time.


"Anyway, they locked young Spalding's wife and the little girl into a room, and were carrying



him on a plank ; he was hardly able to walk when we rode up. I told them that if the man had had any hand in the murder, he would be sure to suffer for it by law, and that if they took the law into their own hands, whether the man was innocent or guilty, they would be sure to suffer, and that would make matters no better for them.

“Well, to make the story short, they agreed to leave him on the plank where he was, and go back to the village.

“As they were going back to the village I saw them open to let someone through them, and then I saw that this was young Spalding’s wife, the poor captain’s pretty daughter. She had escaped from the room, and was as pale as death and nearly as calm. I was in the saddle a few paces from the plank. She walked on straight up to the plank without saying a word, and stood over him, looking down at him. I know my duty, and I’ve done my duty always, and often queer duty it was ; but this knocked me over, looking at her looking down at him. She wasn’t crying, and she never said a




word. If she had thrown herself down beside him I could have stood it; as it was, I could not call the men to take him up. I could not speak to her, and she did nothing but stand and look at him. All at once she came up to me and looked into my face, and said: 'You know my father and the men were killed last night, and they said my husband killed them, and that's my husband there. They were going to throw him over the cliff, over the place near where my father and the men were killed last night. Do you understand?'

"I said I knew about it.

"'And,' said she, 'you are a policeman—what are you going to do with him now?'

"Somehow her words and her ways put me out more than anything I ever met before. But I said: 'We will take him to Rockfall. There he will be safe.'

"'Oh, I knew all about it,' said she. 'My father and the men were killed last night, and this morning the village wanted to kill my husband, and you came to save them, and say "No, he



must be taken back to the town, and be killed there.”’

“I told her that I was quite sure he’d be safe in the town, and that as he had nothing to do with the thing, nothing would be done to him.

“She did not seem even to hear what I said. She was looking up in my face the whole time, and I hadn’t the heart to move. She spoke more like thinking to herself than speaking to me. ‘No, he can’t escape three times. Someone was near killing him last night, and they wanted to kill him this morning, and now the police come to kill him. He can’t escape the third time. There’s one good thing about the police, if they are to kill him they’ll do it outright, and at once. They won’t hurt him first, and then try to throw him over a cliff when he’s too weak to raise his arm. The police will make it sure this third time. Then there will be no one alive in the world but me. That would make the world lonesome and cold. I should always be going to the door at night and opening it and saying “Come in,” and

only the deadly cold wind would come in. Do you understand all this?’

“And I said I did.

“‘Very well, now I want to tell you something you know nothing about. Stop first—you will use only one pair of handcuffs for this!’

“I told her I should need none.

“‘Oh, but I know better than that,’ she said. ‘Now what I want to tell you is this: I was with him when he did it. I helped him to do it. It was I who told him to do it, because—because—because—I had a good reason but I forget it. Did you notice how dark it was last night? Well, you won’t be surprised when you recollect how dark it was that I lost the reason in the dark. Now put the handcuffs on me.’


“And she held out her hands, her little white wrists to me. Damme, but I could see the blue veins in the child’s wrist and no tears in her eyes. Duty is often queer.”

By the time the coastguards had arrived a cart and horse had been procured from the village, and

Markham Spalding, with his young wife sitting beside him, was in it; and the horsemen were ready to set out escorting it to Rockfall. They were to call on their way for the man who had been found on the downs. The coastguard sergeant and his men were to remain at Rockfall in the place of those who had been lost the previous night.

The excitement in the village had somewhat abated, and as the little cavalcade set out for Rockfall, many of the most prudent of the fishermen thanked heaven that the responsibility of young Spalding's death had been taken off their hands.

During the whole of the way from Greenlee to Rockfall the woman never spoke. She sat in a dull lethargy. She sat close to her husband, but took little notice of him. The darkness of that night had entered her soul, and all her mind was as blank as the unfrozen Polar Sea, as dark as the core of adamant. Nothing went on in her mind; her thought was fixed on no image. There was no substantive thought in her mind, but a formula for



her numbed condition possessed her mind as air possesses a valley. The formula was :

“ As I sat up last night waiting for Mark and my father, I fell asleep, and I am dreaming now, and when I awake I shall be with Mark and my father in Heaven.”

As soon as the sad procession reached Rockfall, the wounded men were taken to the police-station, and surgeons summoned. After a long examination the surgeons declared the unknown man's case to be hopeless, but with youth and a good constitution at his back, they had every confidence in the recovery of the young boat-builder.

Towards evening young Spalding was much better. At night the unknown man became conscious, and was informed that he lay in the police-station in danger of speedy death, and that he was suspected of having had something to do with the crime of the night before.

He asked were they sure he was dying.

Yes, the doctors said he would not last twenty-four hours, and might die that night. If he had

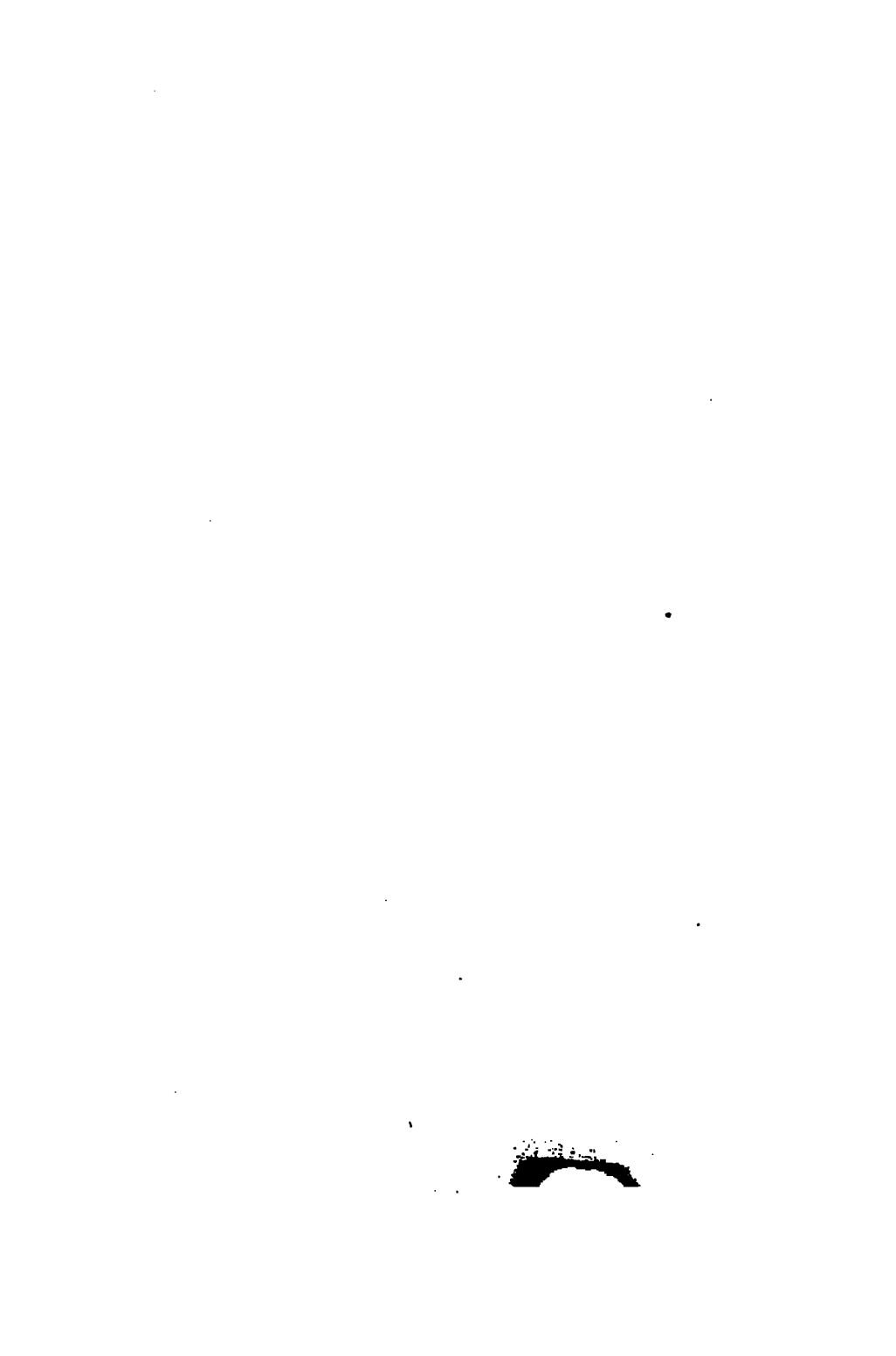
any statement to make he had better do so at once. A magistrate would be summoned to take his deposition. His reply was :

His name was Tom Reynolds. He had been connected with the explosion, and was prepared to tell all.

Thereupon a magistrate was sent for.

END OF VOL. I.

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1. The first part of the document is a list of names and titles, including "The Hon. Mr. Justice" and "The Hon. Mr. Justice".

2. The second part of the document is a list of names and titles, including "The Hon. Mr. Justice" and "The Hon. Mr. Justice".

